

WARHAMMER

Ancient Blood

ROBERT EARL



STALKED BY AN ANCIENT EVIL



SHOUT
SHARE IT

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Ancient blood

This is a dark age, a bloody age, an age of daemons and of sorcery. It is an age of battle and death, and of the world's ending. Amidst all of the fire, flame and fury it is a time, too, of mighty heroes, of bold deeds and great courage. At the heart of the Old World sprawls the Empire, the largest and most powerful of the human realms. Known for its engineers, sorcerers, traders and soldiers, it is a land of great mountains, mighty rivers, dark forests and vast cities. It is a land riven by uncertainty, as three pretenders all vie for control of the Imperial throne. But these are far from civilised times. Across the length and breadth of the Old World, from the knightly palaces of Bretonnia to ice-bound Kislev in the far north, come rumblings of war. In the towering World's Edge Mountains, the orc tribes are gathering for another assault. Bandits and renegades harry the wild southern lands of the Border Princes. There are rumours of rat-things, the skaven, emerging from the sewers and swamps across the land. And from the northern wildernesses there is the ever-present threat of Chaos, of daemons and beastmen corrupted by the foul powers of the Dark Gods. As the time of battle draws ever nearer, the Empire needs heroes like never before.

We walk ragged amongst many peoples of many lands
So that their scorn will make us harder
We thrive on the speed of our wits and the sleight of our hands
And on skill and luck and murder
We face the depths and the darkness of the world alone
So that we may become ever brighter
We live hunted and hated by all but our own
So that the bonds that bind draw ever tighter
We wait for the time of the storm that will call us home
To the birthright of our once and future lands
We pray for our rebirth in that fresh crimson dawn
But until then we trust ourselves to Ushoran's hands

CHAPTER ONE

“Only a fool calls a wind good or ill. The greatest fortune can be brought by the most terrible storm, and the most lethal thunderbolt can fall from the clearest of skies.”

– Strigany aphorism At the crest of the hill the Elector Count of Stirland reined in his mount. After the gallop, his horse was breathing heavily, its sides bellowing in and out, its breath steaming in the morning air. As it recovered, the elector count, also breathless, smiled the smile of a truly content man.

Apart from a ready supply of women and drink, he didn't demand much from life, and that which he did demand awaited him below.

The patchwork of pastures and forests that lay beneath his vantage point contained all that a hunting man could desire. Savage boar, fleet deer, wild goats to tempt a man up onto the most windswept of crags-the barely tamed lands of his estate held them all.

Stirland, fit after a lifetime spent in the saddle, was already catching his breath. He turned, with a squeak of leather, and peered down the path behind him. When he saw how far back his companions had fallen, his smile disappeared, replaced with a scowl of impatience.

He didn't blame the hunt master or his lads for their slow pace. After all, as commoners, their horses wouldn't have looked out of place in the yoke of a plough. He didn't blame his dogs, either. Bull hounds were a strong-winded breed, but no match for Stirland's galloping steed.

No, the elector count was a fair man. The only person whose slowness tried his temper was the one who should have been able to keep up: the skinny, pallid man who was riding his second-best horse, the man who he was trying to befriend.

“Averland!” Stirland roared, his voice sending a flock of ravens squawking from the trees. “Don't bother waiting for them, old man. Stick by me.”

The Elector Count of Averland started at the sound of his host's voice. Then a look of fresh misery crossed his gaunt face, and he spurred his horse unenthusiastically forward. The animal broke into a canter for a dozen hoof beats. Then, content that it had gained the measure of its rider, it slowed back down to a walk.

Stirland's moustache tips twitched with exasperation. Averland had been his guest for the past week, and although they were not friends they both knew that a friendship was worth cultivating. In these troubled times, an elector needed all the political allies he could get. Things had been bad enough when there had just been one

Emperor. Now there were supposedly three.

Yet, as hard as Stirland tried, he was finding Averland damned difficult to like.

“Don’t be afraid to use the spurs,” he bellowed to his guest. “She’s a fine horse, but you have to let her know who’s the master, like all women, hey?”

Averland smiled weakly and twitched his heels. His mare, who certainly knew who the master was, obliged by shuffling into something approaching a trot for a while.

The problem with his fellow nobleman, Stirland decided, was that he thought too much. He spent too much time indoors, whole days, sometimes. He didn’t like getting drunk, or singing, and, as far as Stirland’s spies were aware, Averland was so weak-blooded that he didn’t have even a single mistress.

Yesterday, Averland had even claimed to dislike hunting, at which point Stirland’s patience had almost snapped. The gods had built all of Sigmar’s sons to be hunters, and as far as Stirland was concerned, claiming otherwise was tantamount to heresy.

Hence, he had insisted that Averland accompany him into the glorious carnage of today’s sport. After all, what could be more likely to spark a friendship with the bandy-legged fool than to show him the pleasures of the field?

If they ever got there, of course.

“Come along, men,” Stirland snarled, venting his impatience on the party as a whole. Men and dogs obediently raced to join him at the top of the hill, and even Averland’s horse quickened its pace to keep up with them.

When they arrived, Stirland gave Averland a moment to appreciate the way that the rising sun lit up the hunting grounds beyond. Then he leaned over and slapped him on one shoulder.

“Damned fine view, isn’t it? Look at the way those hills close in onto that forested valley, just like the cross of a virgin’s thighs.” Stirland, lost in the poetry of the image, didn’t see Averland wince. “Just imagine what beasts we’ll find down there,” he continued, his eyes shining. “I don’t know about you, but I’ve got a hankering for boar. Can’t beat the taste of meat reared on blood and acorns.”

“Boar, yes,” said Averland vaguely, and shivered. His eyes were watering in the early morning sunlight, and he turned to look longingly back down the path to the hall. “How long will the hunt last for?”

“Until we’ve tasted the quarry’s blood, or until they’ve tasted ours,” Stirland said, grinning. His men grinned too. They might be servants, but on the hunt they and their lord adopted the easy familiarity of a pack of wolves.

Averland looked at them, his mouth tightening into a ring of petulant disapproval. Then he frowned.

"Don't worry," Stirland said, winking at him. "It's almost always us that tastes the quarry's blood first."

"Unless we do find boar, your lordship," the hunt master added. "Remember what happened when we found that herd last summer? What happened to your cousin Rudolph? The carpenter had to take his leg clean off, and even then it was a close-run thing."

Stirland nodded as if at some happy memory.

"That was a good day's hunting," he said. "Got an even dozen of the beasts before Rudolph got caught. He's just lucky that leg was all he lost. The beast almost got his acorns too."

The party roared with laughter. Even the dogs joined in, yelping with excitement. Averland shuddered, and looked miserably at the wilderness below. The trees looked as dark and treacherous as... well, as dark and treacherous as them, the people who haunted every shadowed corner of his troubled mind.

"Perhaps it will rain," he suggested as the laughter died away, "and we won't find the scent."

"Don't worry about that, your lordship," the hunt master assured him with a malicious confidence. "If we start now, it shouldn't take us long to pick up a scent."

"Well said," Stirland agreed, stirring himself from his cheerful reverie. "Let's not waste any more of the day. Take the dogs out front, Heinz. The rest of you, fall in behind me and Averland. And don't worry," he told his fellow nobleman as the hounds loped off down towards the nearest patch of trees, "if we do find a boar you can take the first stab at it."

"Oh," Averland said, "good."

He wished, not for the first time, that he'd tried to ally himself with somebody else. By the time they had descended into the forest, Stirland's earlier irritation was quite forgotten. He loved it here. The spreading boughs of the trees above turned the sunlight into a thousand shades of green and gold, and the dark labyrinth of the tree trunks always promised a good hunt.

As the party moved silently forwards, the elector count fought back the temptation to whistle an accompaniment to the songbirds hidden in the branches. Instead, grinning at the thought of what lay in store, he slipped his boar spear from its holster and tested its weight.

"Why are you doing that?" Averland asked, his voice shrill enough to draw several disapproving stares.

"Just testing the heft of it," Stirland replied, his voice a hunter's soft murmur.

"You haven't seen anything?" Averland whined, loudly enough to

silence the nearest songbirds.

Stirland took a deep breath, and bit his lip. "No, just getting ready," he whispered.

"What's that you said?" Averland cried.

"I said, no," Stirland snapped. "Can you do me a favour, Averland old man, and keep your voice down? The animals don't like it."

"Oh," Averland said, "all right."

Damned fool, Stirland thought. He was still struggling to contain his disgust when, at a signal from the hunt master, the party drifted to a halt.

Stirland, who realised that he was going to have to treat Averland like the idiot he was, glanced over to tell him to stop, too. When he saw that he had already done so, he felt a moment's surprise. Then he realised that the only reason Averland had halted was that his mare had the sense that he lacked.

For a moment, he considered telling Averland to stop digging his heels into the animal's flanks. Then he decided against it. As long as the idiot kept his mouth shut, he didn't care what he did.

Instead of wasting any more time on his guest, Stirland nudged his horse slowly forward. Its hoofs fell with a practiced stealth that made the gelding worth its weight in silver. Soon Stirland was beside Heinz, and he leaned over so that the hunt master could whisper into his ear.

"Look at the hounds, my lord," he said.

Stirland, ignoring the garlic that laced the man's breath, did so. They were pacing back and forth warily, their hackles raised in bristling manes, and their tails as straight as pokers. Usually, they showed more enthusiasm, more joy. As it was, every stiff-legged movement betrayed the hounds' anxiety about the prey they had found.

"Look at them," Stirland gloated, "it must be boar, mustn't it?"

"Possibly, my lord," Heinz agreed, "or something else."

"Yes, it's boar all right," Stirland mused. "Tell you what, why don't Averland and I follow behind the dogs from now on? They've obviously got a strong enough scent to follow. You can ride behind us."

At another time, Heinz might have argued with his master. The hunt master loved his dogs, and he hated the idea of being even momentarily separated from them. On the other hand, the thought of what Averland might do when faced with a boar was an intriguing one. The shrill, nervous aristocrat had been the butt of the household's contempt from almost the moment he had arrived, and the hunt master had a feeling that he was not about to acquit himself well.

"As you say, my lord," he conceded. "Just be careful that Nellie

there doesn't get to the boar before you. She's a brave old girl, despite her age."

"Don't worry," Stirland reassured him, "I'll look after them. I'll--"

He was cut off by a sudden, terrible howl from Nellie herself. As Stirland and the gamekeeper exchanged a surprised glance, the rest of the pack joined in. As one, they had turned towards a slope that led down towards a tangled ravine, their teeth bared, and their ears lying back flat along their skulls.

"What's wrong with them?" Stirland asked, appalled by the din the hounds were making.

Then the wind shifted, and even he could smell the scent that had so affected the hounds. At first, he thought that it was a goat, and then a boar. Then, with a rush of exhilaration that sent his heart galloping, he realised that it was neither. No natural animal stank so badly, which meant that the things the hounds had found were...

"Beastmen," the gamekeeper hissed, his voice as low as the hiss of his drawn hunting sabre.

Stirland's pulse quickened, as his steed shifted nervously beneath him. For the first time, he heard the movement that was crushing through the undergrowth that covered the ravine. He also heard the sound of snapping twigs from the dark hollows to either side of them, and the silence that had replaced the birdsong.

The elector count snarled, or maybe it was a grin. Either way, in the gloom of the forest, his bared teeth were as sharp and as yellow as his hounds'.

"Men," he called back, his voice as level as a crossbow bolt, "we are ambushed. Form up on me."

"What do you mean 'Ambushed'?" Averland asked, terror in his voice. "How can we be ambushed? This is ridiculous." His terror quickly turned to outrage. "I'm returning to the castle. There's obviously no game here. Honestly, Stirland, this is no pastime for a gentleman."

Luckily, Stirland was no longer paying the slightest bit of notice to him.

"Karl," Stirland said to the man beside him, "you and your boys look out to our rear. G nter, you keep an eye on my Lord Averland."

"Now look here-" Averland began.

Before he could finish, however, the jaws of the ambush closed around them with a terrible hunger. It wasn't the first time Stirland had seen this enemy. He had once passed a pile of their horned heads, left to rot, beside the mile post outside Nuln. When he was a boy, he had seen some of the trophies his father's men had brought back from war, too: snuff boxes made from horns, dice made from bones, and purses made from other parts.

Once, when he'd been a student, he'd even seen one of the things torn to pieces in a pit full of dogs. He had lost a packet on that particular sporting event, but it had been worth it to see such a fight.

However, none of that had prepared him for meeting them head-on, or for the shock of their onslaught.

Although they moved with a weasel's stealth, and although they burst from the brambles as easily as partridge, many of the misshapen pack were massive beasts. The largest stood taller than any man Stirland had ever seen, and the muscles that rolled beneath the stinking mat of their hides looked as strong as the hawsers that towed the barges down the Reik.

Stirland's grin faded, and he let his steed jitter backwards.

The nearest of the things tore free of the last of the brambles, and shook off a shower of thorns and blood. Its head was almost ox-like, Stirland thought, apart from the viciously sharpened horns, and the glitter of insane intelligence in the reddened eyes... and the fangs.

His horse whinnied in fear, its voice joining the hounds' chorus of terror, and for a single, shameful moment, Stirland thought about retreat.

It was Nellie who saved him from the disgraceful thought. One-eared and grey-muzzled though she was, the hound's instinctive hatred for these abominations flared and she lengthened her whine into a terrible snarl. The sudden fire that burned within her animal heart stopped her edging back. It stopped her cowering, and, even as her master's courage was tested, she rushed forward, silent as death as she hurtled towards the nearest of the horrors.

The beastman's piggy eyes blinked eagerly as it caught sight of its assailant, and even as the hound closed in, it chopped the rusted crescent of its axe blade down onto her.

Another hound would have died, split in two as neatly as a rabbit on a butcher's block, but not Nellie. Although a great grandmother, she had been dodging blows ever since she had been a pup, and when the axe bit deep, it was into earth. She was already twisting beneath the three-kneed arc of the monster's legs, her yellowed teeth slicing into the tendons above one of its cloven hooves.

The thing screamed, as she tore out its hamstring. It was a shuddering, soulless sound, and it was enough to slap Stirland from his shock.

"Follow me!" he cried and, the boar spear tucked under his arm like a Bretonnian's lance, he spurred his horse into a charge. "Follow me! Follow me!"

He ignored the first of the beastmen. It had already been crippled by Nellie, and her pack was closing in to finish the thing off. The elector count dodged to one side, and, roaring with the sudden

exhilaration of battle, thrust the point of his spear into the hollow above the following beastman's collar bone.

The steel tip punched through its throat as neatly as a needle through cloth. It sliced through the arteries and muscles of its neck, and only stopped when it became trapped in the vertebra of the thing's spine.

Stirland should have released the haft of the weapon, but, in the wild thrill of the moment, his grip remained stubborn. By the time he remembered to loosen his fingers, it was already too late. The counterweight of his enemy's collapsing body dragged the spear down swiftly enough to hoist him out of his saddle and throw him through the air.

Stirland's horse whinnied in fright and reared back onto its hind legs. The count saw a blur of stirrups and milling hooves before the jarring impact of his fall splintered his vision into a thousand dancing stars.

He wasn't stunned for long. The spasming corpse of the beastman filled the count's senses with the stink of ammonia and rotten meat. The first thing he saw when his vision cleared were the parasites that had already started to swarm from the thing's filth-matted fur.

Stirland's gorge rose as he staggered clear. He spat out a mouthful of blood and bile even as he drew his sword. Then, blinking blood from his eyes, he squared his shoulders and prepared to take charge of the battle.

"My lord!" somebody screamed at him.

Stirland turned to see one of the hunt master's lads waving a spear towards him. The man's face was pale and blood spattered, and his eyes were wide with fear.

It took Stirland a split second to realise that the man wasn't pointing the spear at him. He was pointing it at something behind him.

The count turned, just in time to see the nightmare vision of horns, fangs and rotten fur that loomed over him. It had already swung its axe back, ready to deliver a killing blow.

Too stunned to think properly, the count reacted purely by reflex. He was moving before he knew it, rolling beneath the scything blow of the beastman's arms, and springing back to his feet behind it.

Caught off-balance by the murderous momentum of its attack, the beastman staggered as it turned, and Stirland pounced. His sabre blurred in a backhanded stroke that sent the entire length of its razor edge sawing through hair, hide, muscle and bone.

The blade finished its work in a spray of black blood and Stirland leapt clear. His enemy tried to follow him. Its cloven hoofs managed two faltering steps. Then, with a sticky inevitability, the misshapen

lump of its severed head slid from its shoulders and toppled to the ground.

By the time the rest of the corpse had thudded down beside it, Stirland was already peering around him, evaluating, planning, ready to take control.

He flicked the blood from his blade with the unconscious gesture of a cat flicking water from its tail, and chewed his bottom lip as he watched the battle that was raging through the forest around him. It was like a scene from some hellish ballroom. Half-seen figures lunged and staggered through the blackness of the shadows and the stabbing columns of sunlight. Knots of combat tangled man and monster together, tighter than the participants of any quadrille. Meanwhile, the shrieking of the wounded and the cymbal rhythms of steel against steel provided a perfect, maddening music to the carnage.

Many of Stirland's men had lost their mounts, and, even as he watched, another of them fell. He was dragged from his saddle as his horse reared up, her hooves windmilling at her tormentors, and her eyes white moons of terror in the darkness. Stirland saw the rider crash to the ground in an explosion of leaf litter. The rider's sword flew from his nerveless fingers, and the two beasts who had felled him closed in with shrieks of glee.

By the time Stirland realised that he was charging, he was almost upon them; almost, but not quite. He saw an axe rise above the dazed rider. A beam of sunlight, catching the rusted metal, seemed to set the killing edge on fire. Before the blade could fall, Stirland roared, his challenge as wordless and animalistic as any made that day.

The two beastmen turned from their victim in time to see the lightning strike of Stirland's sword. It crunched through the gristle of the nearest monster's snout, and sliced deep across both of its eye sockets. The beastman leapt back too late, already blinded by blood and pain, and collided with its fellow, who snarled and pushed it away.

As it did so, Stirland struck again, a straight stab that sent the blade punching into the second beast-man's stomach. The blow was so hard that Stirland bruised his hand against the cross guard of his sword. It was also strong enough to skewer the beast-man as neatly as a butterfly on a pin.

Stirland grinned with a terrible satisfaction as he stepped back, twisting the blade free from his victim's falling body. Then he reached down, grabbed the fallen rider by his shoulder, and pulled him to his feet.

"No time to be laying about lad," he said, grinning with a savage good humour, "there's still work to be done."

In a couple of moments, Stirland realised that their work was

over. The beastmen had vanished as suddenly as they had appeared, slipping back into the vastness of the forest that had birthed them.

"Thank Sigmar," Stirland muttered. Then, for the first time, he noticed his casualties, the men who lay bloodied among the corpses of their foes. One of them was propped up against a tree trunk, sobbing with pain, as his mate pressed a wad of moss into his wound. Another sat dazed on the ground, staring silently at the corpse of his horse, and the gutted remains of the horror that had killed it. Yet, although many were bleeding, it seemed that none had been killed. It was a miracle.

"Thank Sigmar," Stirland muttered again, and touched the hammer-headed amulet that he wore around his neck. Then he looked up, and scowled.

"Thorvald," he called to one of his men, who had regained his mount, and was turning the horse to pursue the retreating foe. "Thorvald!"

The rider looked back over his shoulder.

"Stay in formation," the elector count snapped.

"Yes, my lord," the man called reluctantly, and, reining his horse in, he turned back from his pursuit.

"Wait until I've found my horse. By Sigmar's right fist we'll run these vermin down before the day is through. Ah, there he is." Stirland broke off as his gelding came trotting up to him. Its movements were still skittish, and its eyes rolled back and forth nervously. Stirland soothed it, holding its chin, and stroking it behind the ears, before swinging back into the saddle, "Had a fright, did you? Well, never mind. Nothing to worry about. Everybody seems to be here... Oh no."

For the first time, he realised that, although most of his men seemed to have come through intact, Aver-land, that gods cursed, weak-kneed imbecile Averland, was nowhere to be seen.

"Averland!" he roared, making no attempt to hide the rage in his voice. "Where are you? Averland!"

"He's up there, my lord," one of his men said, waving his arm towards the forest. Stirland followed the man's gesture, squinting as he peered into the darkness between the trees.

"Look up, my lord," the huntsman said, and this time the contempt in his voice was unmistakeable.

Stirland looked up. Then he saw what his man was pointing at, and froze.

Of all the creatures Stirland had seen nesting in trees, his fellow elector count was the strangest. Aver-land's legs dangled down on either side of a branch, his hose torn and his skinny knees bloodied by the scramble up into the tree. His fine cloak had gone, torn off by another branch, and his tunic was begrimed with dirt.

However, it was Averland's face that broke Stirland's self control.

Even as he started to laugh, he knew that he shouldn't be doing it. He tried to stop, tried to bite back the mirth that was bursting out of him. He might even have managed it if it hadn't been for Averland's pale expression of comical terror.

"It isn't funny," Averland squeaked, and then fluttered his arms as he started to slip.

Stirland howled with laughter. Nor was he alone. The men all around were rocking in their saddles, the terror and the exhilaration of battle finding expression in their gale of hysterical laughter.

Stop it, Stirland told himself, his ribs aching. You have to stop laughing. It's not funny.

Averland drew himself up into what was supposed to be an expression of dignity. He brushed his clothes down, and lifted himself up from his perch, so that he could stand and look down at the men. He put his hands on his hips and, with a haughty look on his face, slid one foot forward to complete the pose.

It was a mistake. His riding boots were as smooth as silk, even on the sole, and they whipped across the damp bark as easily as skates across a frozen pond. He squawked, as one of his legs shot up into a hip-jarring high kick that pirouetted him around on the branch.

For a moment, Stirland thought that he was going to regain his balance, but it wasn't to be. With a cry, the Elector Count of Averland tumbled from the tree and hit the floor with a bone-jarring thump. His dislodged cape came fluttering down after him.

The noise of his fall was quite inaudible over the roaring laughter of his host and the men.

Oh Sigmar, please help me to stop laughing, Stirland thought, tears streaming down his face. Think about the alliance.

His sides still shaking, he dismounted, and walked over to help Averland to his feet. The man looked up at him, his face white with rage, apart from the red patches that burned on his cheeks. Their heat was nothing compared to the furnace of hatred that burned in Averland's eyes. It looked hot enough to melt iron, hot enough to melt sanity.

It turned the last of Stirland's humour to ashes, and he bent to offer Averland his hand. For a moment, he thought that his fellow nobleman was going to refuse to take it. Then Averland blinked, the hatred in his eyes dulled, and he allowed Stirland to help him up.

"Glad to see you're all right," Stirland said, brushing leaves from Averland's shoulders. "We were damned worried about you, Averland old man, damned worried. That's why we were all so pleased to find you."

"Thank you for your concern," Averland said, his voice as cold as

a razor blade. He looked around at the ring of men surrounding him, and, for a moment, that hatred was back in his eyes, like Morrslieb revealed by a sudden gap in the clouds.

It was enough to still the last of the laughter. The men shifted uncomfortably in their saddles. Stirland cleared his throat, and tried to think of something to say.

“Where’s the hunt master?” he finally asked, noticing that the old man was not among the onlookers.

Their silence grew even more uncomfortable.

“He’s with his hounds, my lord, down in the gully.”

“Well, I’d better go and talk to him,” Stirland said. “Coming with me, Averland?”

The other elector grunted, and followed in Stirland’s wake. They found the hunt master and his pack of hounds in the ravine from where the beastmen had sprung their ambush. Nellie, the hound that had drawn the first blood of the fight, was in the midst of them.

She lay panting, her broken body cushioned on a mat of thorns. The grey fur of her muzzle was dark with the blood of her enemies, and her torn and splintered body was wet with her own blood. One eye was gone, the socket closed with bloody tears. The eye that remained rolled in mute agony.

Her pack gathered around her. She had been mother to some, grandmother to others. At first, they had licked her wounds, whining as they had cleaned the filth from the gouge marks that had broken her. Now, as her agony drew to an end, they sat and howled, their voices mingling into a chorus of loss that echoed through the dark labyrinth of the forest.

The hunt master sat among them, his gnarled hand stroking the patch of unbroken fur beneath Nellie’s chin. Although his voice was warm and soothing, his face was sodden with tears. They made rivers of the furrowed lines of his face, before dripping down to mix with Nellie’s blood.

Stirland swallowed, blinked and looked away. For the first time in his life, he felt old. The joy of the hunt, which usually sang through his whole being after the slaughter, was missing. He felt tired and sick, and his blood felt as though it was running as slowly as sap in the winter.

He sighed, and turned back to watch Nellie breathe out her last, long breath. Then she lay still.

The hunt master stroked her for a moment more, and then thumbed her eyelid closed, and stood up, his face shining in the forest gloom.

“We’ll take her back with us,” Stirland told him, grasping the man by the shoulder. “Have the lads make a bier, and we’ll give her a

proper send-off. If ever a hound deserved to be praised into Sigmar's halls, it's that one."

"Thank you, my lord," the hunt master said, pride straightening his back, even though tears still dripped into the tangle of his beard.

"Make a bier?" Averland asked, looking at Stirland as if he'd gone mad. "We don't have time for that. You saw those things, those horrible, horrible things." He paused and wiped a shaking hand across his brow. "They're no better than filthy Strigany."

"Yes, we saw them," Stirland told him, "saw them, killed them and drove them off. We'll hunt them down though, don't you worry."

Averland's mouth fell open, and he edged backwards. Now, it wasn't rage in his eyes, it was panic.

"I mean," Stirland said, embarrassed by his fellow nobleman's cowardice, "we'll return to the castle tonight. It's too late, and we have injured men and hounds."

"We should go now," Averland insisted.

"It won't take a minute to make a bier."

"For Sigmar's sake, Stirland, it's only a damned dog."

"Yes," Stirland said, "for Sigmar's sake."

"I mean look... look at it." Averland strode past the gamekeeper, brushed past the hounds and pointed. "The damned thing's dead."

To make his point, Averland drew back his leg, and, before Stirland realised what he was going to do, he kicked the dog's body.

Had he not been so shocked, Stirland might have intervened in time. As it was, Averland, nineteenth elector count of his line, turned from kicking the dog to face the full force of the fist that the hunt master had swung at him.

The crunch of his breaking nose and his squeal of pain were amongst the most satisfying things Stirland had ever heard.

So much for diplomacy, he thought, and gave the orders to return home.

CHAPTER TWO

“Why blame the fish for swimming or the well-made arrow for flying straight?”

– Strigany aphorism
Domnu Brock’s caravan had arrived at noon, its ragged wagons emerging from the forest like a battered fleet from a stormy sea.

The canvas that covered the vehicles, usually well mended and snowy white, was as torn and grubby as the flags of a defeated army. The brightly-coloured patterns that covered their wooden frames were battered and chipped. Even their horses, as much a part of their owners’ families as any human, were unbrushed and slow footed with exhaustion.

It had been two weeks since the Strigany had left the last town. Two weeks, during which the domnu had mercilessly driven his people and their animals onwards, threatening, pleading, cajoling. He knew that the immensity of the Reikwald was no place to linger, not even for the hundred or so people who followed him, well armed though they were.

Now, as Domnu Brock stood on the seat of his wagon, he congratulated himself on having brought the caravan through safely. He stood tall with the pride of his achievement, his leather jerkin tight across the barrel of his chest, his bare arms folded to reveal the boulders of his biceps. Although he had seen over forty summers, Brock still maintained the heavily-muscled build that had served him well in the dozen brutal professions he had followed through the Empire, before he had rejoined his people.

His face also bore testament to a life lived, if not well, then at least thoroughly. It was a battered, misshapen face. At some point it had lost an eye, the socket covered by a patch of black silk, and the square jaw, although as heavy as a prize fighter’s, was light on teeth. It should have been a brutal face, but, somehow, the lines of good humour that cut through the wrinkles of the leathered skin prevented that. So, instead of brutal, it just looked battered.

At the moment, it looked cheerful too. Brock was smiling, his one good eye squinting against the setting sun as he looked approvingly over his people’s encampment.

It was like one big animal, he thought. The wagons were its hide. The sentry points were its senses, and the market within was its hungry belly. The thought prompted the domnu to lift his gaze and peer through the smoke of the cooking fires to the walls of the town beyond.

It was called Lerenstein, apparently. The domnu had never been

this far north, so he had never been to Lerenstein before, but during his half a century on this world he had been to a hundred towns like it. He knew that the people would be ignorant, backward even. Their craftsmen would be peasants, the jewellers no more than blacksmiths, and the tailors barely able to hold a needle.

That was good. What was even better was that their purses, although crudely made, would be plump from the year's rich harvest.

The domnu's good eye gleamed with pleasure, and the scar that ran through the blind socket of the other twisted to keep it company. Lerenstein offered rich pickings to those who knew how to do the picking, and Brock's people knew how to do that all right.

Then he caught sight of his son, Mihai, and he felt the familiar mixture of pride and irritation. On the one hand, although the lad was not yet twenty, he had proved himself a true Strigany a hundred times over. His wits were as sharp as his fingers were fast, and he had earned enough to buy his own wagon, even though he had not yet reached his first score. It had taken many of the wagon masters twice as long to succeed so well.

On the other hand, Mihai didn't seem to realise what a hard world this was. He laughed too much, and talked too much. An open mouth, Brock considered irritably, meant an empty mind. Mihai lacked respect, too. Not that he was ever rude to Brock. His father had not risen to command, first, a mercenary company in his youth, and then this entire caravan in his retirement, by allowing that sort of thing, but, Ushoran knew, the disrespect was there. Mihai could never do a thing without arguing.

He didn't seem to realise that respect was a currency that needed to be earned, spent and invested. It was the only way he would ever become domnu in his turn.

"Mihai," Brock called, and Mihai turned to face him. Unusually for a Strigany he had red hair, a gift from Isolde, his departed mother. It glowed in the sunlight, and so did his teeth when he smiled.

I wonder how many red-haired babes and sudden weddings we've left behind us, Brock thought, and there it was again, that mix of pride and irritation.

"What is it?" Mihai asked. He paused, and then added, "Domnu?" Brock remained stony faced.

"Come here," he said. Mihai's smile faded, and he shrugged to his companions before stepping up to the wagon. It was a gesture, Brock thought, which was calculated to infuriate him. He ground his teeth and glanced towards the Esku twins, Boris and Bran. As always they were standing behind his son like two identical shadows.

Brock remembered catching the three of them stealing cider apples when they were children. How he'd walloped them. He'd have

difficulty doing that now, he thought as he regarded the men they had become.

“Greetings domnu,” they chorused, and Brock nodded to them before turning back to his son.

“What are you up to?” Brock asked him. “There’s still work to be done before nightfall. We need firewood, and the stockade can always be improved upon.”

“We were just going into town,” Mihai said, “to have a look around. It’s always good to know what’s around the next corner.”

“Is it now?” Brock asked.

“So the petrus tell us,” Mihai replied, his good humour turning to defiance. Why, he wondered, did his father have to act like such a miserable old git? It had always been that way. He supposed it was because the domnu didn’t want to show any favouritism, although that hardly made it fair.

Well, to the hells with him.

“All right,” Brock relented, seeing the sense in the idea. “Have a look around, but remember, you’ll be about as inconspicuous as three foxes in a chicken coop. Nobody trusts a Strigany, so they’ll be watching you. Behave.”

“Yes, domnu,” Mihai lied, and, with a nod that was just short of respectful, he and his two henchmen made off towards Lerenstein.

Brock watched them go, his face troubled. He had never known his own father, that was part of the problem. What rank should he think of his son as holding? Brock had always been at ease with his comrades, his subordinates, and his superiors, but with his son... Maybe he should have a talk about this with the petru.

He shrugged, and turned back to look over the rest of the caravan. The dangers of the forest lay behind them, the riches of Lerenstein ahead.

With the contented sigh of a shepherd who has led his flock to safety, Brock lit a pipe, fitted the stem between a gap in his teeth, and sat back to watch his people work. The sun had long since set, and Mannslieb had dropped behind the hills, when Mihai, Boris and Bran met up beneath Deaf Tsara’s wagon. All three were swaddled in loose black cloth. The tops of their hands were covered in charcoal, and the white skin of their faces was hidden behind dark scarves.

“Got the gear?” Mihai whispered.

“Yes,” Bran lisped, softening the s so that it wouldn’t carry. “No help from Boris, of course. I didn’t even think I’d be able to wake him up.”

“Funny,” Boris said. “Hilarious. We’ll all probably laugh at that one later.”

“Who’s laughing?” Bran spread his hands innocently. “I’m just

glad your snoring didn't wake dad up."

"If he can sleep through your jabbering, he can sleep through anything."

"Let's get moving," Mihai said, interrupting their bickering. On another occasion he would have let them carry on. It was always entertaining, even if he sometimes did have to break up the occasional fight. There was no time for such fun and games tonight, though. Tonight they had work to do.

"We've got some ground to cover before we even get there, remember," he told them and, before they could reply, he set off.

The trio crawled silently through a gap in the stockade and out onto the common beyond. Then, quiet as smoke, they drifted across the field towards the town of Lerenstein.

Its walls were as black and as featureless as an open grave against the starlit expanse of the night sky. Even so, the Strigany, reading Lerenstein's silhouette as easily as if they had lived there all their lives, moved directly towards the section of the wall that they had previously identified. There was an angle there, a corner where an extra section of the growing town had been walled in.

When they reached the place, the three Strigany stopped and waited. They listened to the distant barking of a dog, the brush of the wind against the trees, and the faint crackle of the watch fire in their own encampment. Only when they were satisfied did Mihai lead on.

He pressed his body into the corner the two walls made, and started climbing. The angle made it easy, and the poor masonry even easier. His fingers and toes, well versed by a lifetime of mischief, found so many holds and ledges that he raced up the wall as easily as a squirrel up a tree.

Thirty feet later, his fingers found the edge of the battlement. The wiry tendons in his forearms stood out as he pulled himself up, and he slithered onto the walkway with a serpentine grace.

Again he paused, listened, and looked. Lerenstein lay below him, the night-blackened roofs reminding him of the steepled wings of sleeping bats. In the distance, the dog finally stopped barking.

Mihai turned and looked back over the wall. He made a fist and put his arm out over the edge. Then he opened and closed his hand, the white flash of his palm, the signal that Boris and Bran would be waiting for. Mihai waited until he saw the first hint of movement in the darkness below, and then sank back down onto his heels. A moment later, the twins rolled over the wall to join him. They took a couple of deep breaths, and then, without a word passing between them, all three stooped down below the silhouette of the crenellations and loped off along the town wall.

It didn't take them long to find the building they had spotted that

afternoon. The temple was big enough to be fit for Ushoran, let alone the lesser god to whom it was actually dedicated, and the size of it meant that it backed so far from the street that it almost touched the wall.

Again, Mihai led the way. He took a deep breath, and then raced along the wall, twisting at the last moment to hurl himself towards the building. There was moment of free fall, and then the thunk of the roof beneath him.

He landed on all fours, muscles taut, and joints sprung so as to soften the impact of his fall. The tiles remained solid beneath his hands and feet, and with a silent prayer of thanks to his god, he scuttled up the slope of the roof, already looking for the next perch.

There it was, a high barn that served as both stable and warehouse. It was thatched, too. Perfect.

Mihai licked his lips as he heard the twins landing lightly behind him. In the daylight, and from the street below, the distance between this roof and the next hadn't seemed much. Now, he wasn't so sure that they hadn't underestimated it. The ten feet that separated the two roofs seemed a lot more.

Boris and Bran appeared on either side of him.

"Best use the rope," Bran whispered, leaning close enough for Mihai to feel the warmth of his breath.

"I reckon," Boris said, and Mihai smiled. If these two agreed on something, then he wasn't going to argue.

"All right. Give it to me, I'll take it. Right. You two get ready for the bounce."

Mihai looped the coil of rope around his shoulders, as the twins slipped over the ridge of the roof, and eased their way down the other side. When they were almost at the gutter, they stopped and sat facing each other, legs outstretched for maximum traction.

They linked hands to make a sling. Then they turned, and nodded towards Mihai.

He didn't realise that he was grinning as he leapt over the ridge and rushed down the roof. The grin grew even wider as the sole of his right foot punched into the twins' interlocked palms, like a stone into the sling of a trebuchet. Then he was being hurled through the air, the void blurring beneath him, and he bit back a howl of joy.

The rush ended as he crashed into the thatch. His fingers closed on thick handfuls of straw, and he pulled himself up, wriggling through the thatch like a snake through the grass. He made for the chimney stack at the corner of the roof, tying off the rope and throwing the weighted end back to the twins.

He grinned as he watched them silently arguing over who would go first, both gesticulating like mime artists. Bran won and, wrapping

the rope around his wrist, he leapt across the street, grabbing an extra couple of feet of rope as he jumped forward, so that, when he swung down, his feet hit just below the gutter.

He scrambled onto the roof, and then threw the rope back to his brother. By the time the two of them had joined Mihai, he had already untied the rope and picked out the next roof. This is easy, he thought, looking out across the rooftops of Lerenstein. The buildings were huddled together as close as a herd of animals seeking to defend themselves against some predator.

Fat lot of good it does them, Mihai thought with a smug grin. This is too easy.

Indeed, it wasn't until three houses later that he fell. He decided that it wasn't his fault. If the twins hadn't been on the point of violence over whose turn it was to swing across on the rope next, Mihai would have used it.

As it was, he had shut them up by taking a run down the slope of the clay-tiled roof that they'd been perched on, bunching his legs, and hurling his body forward in a wild dive. It was a good jump, and would surely have carried him across, if only the clay tiles at the bottom of the roof hadn't shattered beneath his feet.

The shards had bitten into his soles, even as he tumbled clumsily into the space between the houses, and suddenly the exhilaration, which had filled his belly with fire, had curdled into stomach-churning terror. Freefall had made a lethal weapon of the cobbled street below, and it was already rushing to meet him. He twisted in mid air, and snatched for the guttering.

He got three fingers to the gutter. Not enough to hold on, but enough to swing him into the wall. As his fingers slipped from their precarious hold, Mihai scrabbled at the crumbling plaster of the building, trying to find a hold.

Below him, a long, long way below, the falling roof tiles shattered, the noise terrifyingly loud in the quiet streets.

Mihai, meanwhile, was plummeting past a window. He grabbed for the ledge, and it broke his fall. Then, as the weight of his body swung unsupported beneath him, he was tumbling down again.

He bit back the scream that tightened his throat, and tried to think through the fog of panic that had gripped him.

Five feet later, his bare feet caught on the top of the door jam. It was too narrow to stand on, but it was wide enough to scrape the skin off of Mihai's insoles, and bounce him away from the wall and into the street.

Straightening his legs and throwing his arms out, Mihai landed. The impact knocked the breath out of him, and, as he tumbled across the street, the hard fists of the cobblestones punched painfully into

him. A rib snapped. Something popped within his shoulder. Stars exploded across his field of vision, and, as he rolled to a stop against the house on the other side of the street, he was already spitting blood.

By the time he could stand up, the twins were already on the street with him, their concern turning to relief.

"Very pretty," Boris whispered, "but let's save the circus tricks for later."

"It isn't that we don't like to see some sense knocked into you," Bran added. "It's just that we don't have time to waste."

"I'm fine," said Mihai sarcastically, "thanks for asking."

The twins smirked with relief beneath their scarves, as Mihai, grimacing at the pain, pressed his shoulder against the wall, and, with a sudden jab, popped the bone back into its socket.

"Do you want to watch me do it again?" he asked. "You know me, always ready for a bit of impromptu acrobatics."

"You know what?" Bran asked, glancing quickly up and down the street. "I think we're almost there. Do you want to stroll over and do the dogs while we go back up?"

"All right," Mihai agreed, pleased that somebody else had suggested it. It was easy enough to hide his pain down here, but climbing back up would be another thing. "Wait until you see me with them, and then go in. Wave on the way out, and I'll meet you back at the wall."

"Will do," the twins chorused, and then raced each other to be the first one back up the rope they had used to abseil down from the rooftops.

Mihai took a moment to blink away the last of his tears. Then he rearranged his tattered clothing, and limped painfully off towards their target. The innkeeper was proud of his two dogs. It never occurred to him for a moment that they would be a source of mockery. Indeed, when people sniggered behind his back, it wasn't the dogs that they were mocking, but the contrast between them and their master, and the fact that the dogs were everything that their master was not.

The innkeeper was small, so small that more than one drunken customer had had his head broken for suggesting that his host might have had halfling blood. The innkeeper's dogs, on the other hand, although definitely mongrels, were massive. Their shoulders were as high as most men's waists, and their fangs wouldn't have shamed a boar. They had none of the lankness of the Empire's coach dogs, either. They were thickly muscled, especially around the traps of their jaws.

Then there was the matter of hair. The innkeeper was as bald as a

new-born babe. The dogs, by contrast, had shaggy grey pelts that hinted at wolves in their ancestry, or maybe, somebody had once suggested, even bears.

Although his customers sometimes sniggered behind the innkeeper's back, they had more sense than to do it to his face. The one characteristic he and his dogs did share was a fierce loyalty to each other. Not only that, but, somehow, whenever the conversation turned to their master, the dogs' ears pricked into wicked little points, and their lips curled back to reveal teeth that always seemed to be at groin level.

That was why, his customers decided, the mismatch between the innkeeper and his dogs wasn't really funny, not at all.

Mihai had never seen the innkeeper, so he had no opinion. He wouldn't have wasted time on forming one, either. He was too busy concentrating on the dogs.

They stood on the other side of the iron-barred gate that led to their master's premises, dead still as they watched the Strigany. When he had called to them through the bars, they had padded silently over to see what he was. Lesser dogs might have barked, but they didn't. When it came to intruders in their master's yard, they had long since learned that barking just spoiled the fun.

And yet, as Mihai spoke to them, they began to wonder if he was an intruder at all. The words he used were as meaningless as any human's, but the intent in them was clear. He was neither predator nor prey. He was their friend.

They cocked their ears to hear him better. His voice was as warm as the den they had been born in, as sweet as a rabbit. It was as soothing as a full belly, or the stroke of their master's hand, and just as welcome. Their tails began to wag.

Then, with the insane confidence of the truly faithful, Mihai pushed his upturned palm through the bars. It was empty and open, and he bent it downwards so that the arteries and veins beneath his skin were exposed.

The dogs paused, confused. Then their muzzles wrinkled above their canines, and they sniffed. Their tails paused, and then wagged faster.

Mihai smiled, although he was careful not to show his teeth. Instead, he recited another verse of the animal charm. He had learned it as well as all Strigany, and better than most. The words flowed sweetly as he concentrated on lacing them with suggestion.

The dogs' ears twitched eagerly and they sat down before him. The instinct to defend their territory was as forgotten as their love of violence. They were too busy listening, as spellbound by Mihai's voice as children engrossed in their favourite bedtime story.

Above, the darkness flickered as two shapes made their way to the top of the inn. If the dogs heard the thud or the rustle as the twins landed on the thatch of their master's roof and began to cut their way through, they gave no sign. They remained silent and still, their eyes mesmerised, as Mihai continued to speak to them.

It didn't take the twins long to emerge. Mihai couldn't see what they were carrying, but, as they fled, the bulge of their tunics made them look like acrobatic hunchbacks. He waited until they had vaulted over the peak of the carriage house before he recited the last verse of the charm, his voice whispering to silence as gradually as a falling tide leaving a beach.

Then, with the dogs still spellbound, he moved slowly away, turned and disappeared into the night. "What did you get?" he whispered to Bran, as Boris descended from the roof behind him.

"All sorts," Bran whispered back, and patted the bulge in his tunic. "We'll show you once we're clear."

His twin joined them, loosely looping the rope around his shoulders, and the three of them scurried up the steps that led up to the town wall. Once they reached it, Mihai took a peek through the battlements at the reassuring sight of the encampment beyond. The watch fire glowed a dull red, the occasional spark of flame reflecting off the varnished wagons that were their homes.

He was just about to ask Boris for his length of rope, so that he could knot the two ends together into an abseiling loop, when, from out of the darkness, there was a grunt and a curse.

Mihai and Bran froze. Boris, who had tripped over the sleeping watchman, rolled back to his feet.

The three Strigany watched as the watchman struggled to his feet. They could smell the stink of ale on his breath as he cursed again, blinking the sleep from his eyes, and peering into the darkness. Then he saw the Strigany, and his head cleared enough for him to open his mouth to shout an alarm.

All three of them hit him at the same time. Boris grabbed his ankles, and threw him forward, even as Bran's fist impacted on his temple, and Mihai's fingers found his throat.

Beneath this three-sided attack, the guard was lifted, twisting, into the air, and then dropped, with the dull thud of a piece of beef hitting the butcher's block.

The three Strigany crouched down around him, ears straining for any sound that might indicate that the guard's strangled cry had been heard.

"Is he dead?" Boris asked unhappily, and Bran felt for his pulse.

"No. You couldn't even do that right, you great ox."

"I wasn't trying to," Boris snapped back.

“Keep your voices down,” Mihai suggested, and peered down into the unconscious guard’s drink-sodden features. “Maybe we should kill him,” he said. “He’ll tell everybody we were Strigany, for sure.”

“Doesn’t mean that anybody will believe him,” Bran said, but they all knew that everybody would. In the past, their caravan had been blamed for floods, forest fires, disappearing villagers, and, even, on one memorable occasion, the outbreak of root weevil. If they had been blamed for these things, which they couldn’t have done if they’d tried, then they would certainly be blamed for this.

“Ushoran, I hate peasants,” said Boris, and for once his brother agreed.

“Even so, I don’t like the idea of killing him.”

“Neither do I,” Mihai said angrily, “but what else is there?”

The three of them sat in silence for a moment. They knew very well what else there was, but none of them wanted to say it. It was Mihai who broke the silence.

“Looks like it’s going to have to be the petru, then,” he said, sighing miserably, “and the domnu will probably find out.”

The guard grunted and his eyes flickered open.

“This is all your fault,” Mihai told him, and a short right hook sent the guard back down into oblivion.

Petru Engel sat, as still and as wrinkled as a lizard, within the confines of his wagon. It was as tightly organised, and as immaculately clean as all of the Striganies’ wagons. Like all of them, it also had its own distinctive smell. In this case it was a mixture of pipe weed, lamp oil and the scent of the petru himself.

The old man had lived within these wooden walls for more than seventy years, and Ushoran willing, he intended to live within them for another seventy. Tonight, as on most nights, he was as wide awake as the owls that hunted through the darkness outside.

The petru loved this time. In the stillness, it was so easy to silently recite the stories of his people, telling them, and retelling them to himself, so that the tracks of them were pressed ever more indelibly into his mind.

With his thoughts as placid as a pond, the tales virtually told themselves. In the peace and the tranquillity of the sleeping camp...

There was a flurry of knocks against his door.

The petru’s eyes cleared, brightening into alertness above the grey

thatch of his beard. There was another flurry of knocks, and he stretched before going to open the door. The other good thing about these nocturnal meditations, he reflected, was that he was ready for callers. For some reason, the more distressed somebody was, the more likely they were to wait until the middle of the night before coming to ask his advice.

"No need to knock so loudly," he grumbled, as he lifted the latch. "I was waiting for you."

"How did you know we were coming?" his visitor asked. The petru just shook his head mysteriously as he tried to identify the men who stood in the darkness outside. There were three of them. No, not three, he realised, four. One was slumped unconscious between the rest.

He shifted so that lamplight spilled from his door. The scant illumination it cast was enough. He recognised Mihai, the domnu's son, by his red hair, and his two friends by the fact that they were always with him.

"Come in, Mihai," the petru said, drawing back into his wagon, and gesturing for them to follow. "You too, Boris and Bran."

The trio bowed politely towards the petru's family shrine as they entered, dragging their unconscious companion with them.

"Ah yes," the petru said sagely, and nodded towards the stunned watchman, while wondering what in the seven hells had happened, "but first, why don't you tell me in your own words what happened?"

"Had a bit of trouble on the city walls," Mihai said. He had been ready to lie, but, against the all-knowing wisdom of the petru, deception was obviously impossible. "We were on our way back from the city when we bumped into the watchman here."

The petru's knees popped as he squatted down beside the watchman and felt the bruises on the man's chin. To his relief, there was a pulse beneath them.

"Care to tell me what was worth creating all this trouble for?" he asked.

"You're right, petru, it was stupid of us. It's just been so long since we've had any fun."

"That wasn't my question."

"A ham, three bottles of brandy, four shillings and three pennies, and a bag of tobacco."

Petru Engel nodded distractedly. He had taken the guard's head between his hands, and started rolling it with the steady rhythm of a prospector panning for gold. After a few moments, the man's bloodshot eyes blinked open and he grunted.

"Look at me," the petru told him. The man looked.

Neither Mihai nor the twins understood what happened next, let

alone how it was done. All they saw were the patterns that the petru's thumbs pressed into the dirty skin of the guard's temples, and all they heard were the numbers the old man chanted, his voice as steady as a hypnotist's.

Petru Engel didn't say anything else until the guard's eyes had glazed back over, and spit had started to drool from his slack mouth.

"Tonight," he said, "you drank some ale. What did you do tonight?"

"Drank," the man slurred, "ale."

"After you had drunk the ale, you went to vomit over the wall," the petru told him. "What did you do after you had drunk the ale?"

"Puked," he said, his gorge rising as he spoke, "over the wall."

"That was when you fell."

"Fell. I fell."

"You won't wake up until daylight comes. When you do, you will remember that you drank some ale, you vomited over the wall, you slipped and you fell."

The man grunted.

"Now sleep," the petru told him. "Sleep deeply. Sleep well."

The man's eyes snapped closed. Even his three captors yawned, their eyes watering and jaws cracking.

"Now, I suggest that you take him back to the base of the wall."

"Yes, petru," Mihai said, nodding gratefully, "we will. About the expedition... Will you tell the domnu?"

"No need for that," the petru said, shaking his head, and letting the three feel a moment of false relief, "After all, you will be telling him yourself, tomorrow. Oh, and that pipe weed you mentioned, just pop it on the ledge there would you?"

"Yes, petru," Mihai said miserably. Then he took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and led his little group out of the caravan.

He'll make a good domnu one day, the petru thought, as his visitors slipped back into the night, carrying the guard between them. That is, unless his father kills him tomorrow.

A grin split the old man's face as he reached for the tobacco they had left, and filled his pipe.

CHAPTER THREE

“The fox fears the wolf, the wolf fears the boar, the boar fears the ogre. What an animal fears is as much a part of it as its fur or teeth. What an animal fears is part of what defines it, but Strigany are not animals.”

– From the Ode to Ushoran “It’s really quite simple, your lordship,” Stirland’s chancellor told him, as his liege paced up and down the great hall of his castle. “As we have discussed, there is a key for every lock, and the key for Averland is the Strigany.”

“But it’s ridiculous,” Stirland said. “What does he care what happens to the Strigany? If they rob the burghers it serves the swine right. To think of all the trouble I had getting my tribute from Arnborst this year. I still say we should have hung some of the burghers. Burghers! Like they’re any better than honest peasants who pay their tithes.”

“Yes,” the chancellor said vaguely as he watched his master pace. It was always this way. The elector count always ended up arriving at the right decision, but, by Sigmar’s balls, he always took the longest route to get there. The click of Stirland’s boot heels echoed off the granite walls of the empty hall, and his face worked with thought. It worked hard. The chancellor waited.

“Anyway,” Stirland said, gesturing towards his chancellor, “I like the Strigany. Old Tilly is the best damn horse trainer I’ve ever had. I think that even Heinz might have some Strigany in him, the old villain. We were lucky to have a man in the cells to behead in his place. As it is, he’s got to stay in hiding until Averland leaves, even though he was well within his rights to clip him.”

“Within his rights, your lordship? To strike a nobleman?”

“Well, no, not exactly.” A moment of unaccustomed doubt flickered across the count’s face. Then it was gone, washed away by a happier memory.

“I remember my younger days, too. When I was a student in Altdorf... Well, let’s just say that Strigany girls leave nothing to be desired, nothing at all.”

The count leered happily at the memory, and the chancellor resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

“I doubt if Averland will be persuaded by that argument, my lord,” he suggested, and Stirland barked with laughter.

“I doubt you’re wrong,” he scoffed, “weak-blooded bastard that he is. He even sent Gertrude away, you say?”

“Yes, my lord,” the chancellor said, nodding. Gertrude had been sent to ease Averland’s discomfort after the hunting expedition. “She

said he looked quite terrified when she offered to... well, you know, comfort him."

Stirland chuckled.

"Doesn't like hunting, doesn't like drinking, doesn't like women. I don't know what's wrong with..."

The count stopped pacing, a sudden suspicion burning in his eyes. He looked around, and lowered his tone, before voicing his concern.

"You don't think he's a cultist, do you? A follower of one of the Dark Gods, Sigmar curse them?"

"No," the chancellor reassured him, "even the witch hunters would hesitate to equate a lack of appetite with the worship of the Dark Gods. No, he's just weak-blooded, or perhaps more than that. I recently received a letter from my old friend Professor Fritz Van Jungenblauen from Marienburg. He has a theory that the raising of a babe can affect the way it behaves in later life."

"That's Averland stuffed then," Stirland leered. "Remember his mother? Challenged the top courtesan in Altdorf to a competition, apparently. Won, too. Not that she wasn't a damned fine-looking woman in her day. I saw a painting of her once. Had an arse like two pigs in a blanket. Lovely."

"Jungenblau's theory would certainly hint at a connection between the character of the countess and the nervousness of her son in these matters." The chancellor nodded.

Stirland grunted. "Makes some sort of sense, I suppose. Still, don't see why he should have it in for the Strigany."

"Jungenblau theorises that, in order to survive, the fragile mind projects those parts of itself that it finds disturbing onto other individuals or groups. In this way, it sublimates unpleasant feelings, and protects its vestige of pride."

"What's that mean in Reikspiel?"

"Averland's a lunatic."

"I could have told you that," Stirland said. Then he sighed. "But I understand what you're saying. By playing along with Averland's foibles, and helping him to persecute the Strigany, we'll make him our ally."

"Precisely. It's always better to go with the grain of a man's character. That's why, if you remember my liege, I advised against taking him hunting."

"Yes, yes, yes," Stirland said, waving the comment away. "Never mind that now. What we have to decide is, what should we suggest be done to the Strigany?"

The chancellor looked down at his immaculately polished fingernails. "There have been precedents, from history."

"What precedents?"

The chancellor looked at Stirland.

Stirland looked back.

"No. Oh no, there'll be none of that. Nothing worse than the unsporting spilling of blood, even Strigany blood, damn them."

"In that case, perhaps you would care to read the proclamation I have prepared? It should provide Averland with what he desires, and us with the basis of our alliance."

Stirland unfurled the scroll his chancellor handed him with a wry smile. The old rogue always seemed to know where their deliberations would end. Then, he read the proclamation, and the smile left his face.

"This is a bit strong," he said.

"As strong as it needs to be," the chancellor said, "without spilling blood, at least, not too much."

"And you're sure there's nobody else we could better ally ourselves with?"

"My lord, I believe that we have already discussed that exhaustively."

"Well, stuff it then," Stirland said, frowning, "I'll do it. Damned if I like it though."

"Yes, my lord," the chancellor said, and, with a bow, he left his master to his thoughts. In the same hall, a couple of hours later, the Elector Counts of Averland and Stirland met, neither of them realising exactly what they were about to set in train. It was late afternoon, and the sunlight streamed in through the high, narrow windows. The light warmed almost every flagstone of the hall, but when the counts met to embrace they found that they were standing in a patch of darkness.

Stirland ignored the feeling that this was an omen. Instead, he gestured his guest towards a table, and the platter that awaited them.

"Take a seat, Lord Averland," he said, "and have a glass of wine with me."

"Thank you," Averland said, "although I'd prefer a glass of boiled water."

He still sounded as if he had the flu, Stirland noticed. The hunt master's fist had crushed his nose nicely. Congratulating himself on saving the old villain by executing a poacher instead, Stirland poured a goblet of boiled water for his guest, and, after a moment's hesitation, poured water for himself, too.

The things we do for diplomacy he thought, as he drank the damned stuff.

"So," he said, sitting down at the table, and looking across at Averland, "it's been a real pleasure having you as my guest. Your tastes are obviously more sophisticated than mine." Sigmar forgive me for the lies, he thought. "I must say, I'm glad you were such a good sport about the hunting."

“Yes,” Averland said, his tone miserable, and his eyes as downcast as always. “By the way, my aides tell me that the lunatic who attacked me was executed this afternoon.”

“That’s right,” Stirland said. “I did send you an invitation, but your man told me you were otherwise engaged.”

Averland shivered. “I’ve never liked the sight of blood,” he said, and took a sip of water.

“Anyway,” Stirland said, and, clearing his throat, he started reciting the lines his chancellor had given him. “Although I’m a little embarrassed by the rustic nature of my court, I am glad to have learnt so much from you.”

“Really?” Averland asked, scepticism evident on his face.

“Oh yes,” Stirland lied, “especially about the Strigany. I never realised quite what a plague they were.”

Averland looked as if he’d been slapped. His eyes, usually hooded and downcast, flashed as they fixed on Stirland, and his pallid complexion exploded in blossoms of red and white. Meanwhile, his mouth, usually a miserable frown, twisted into a feral snarl.

Sigmar, thought Stirland, what did I say?

Then Averland spoke, and Stirland realised that the sudden blast furnace of hatred that had opened up in his guest’s face had nothing to do with him, and everything to do with the Strigany.

“Yes!” Averland hissed, and Stirland drew back from the man. He suddenly seemed a lot bigger. “Yes! They are a plague. They spread disease, like rats, and they consort with the Dark Powers, bargaining with them for our destruction. They say they don’t, but they do. You can tell just by looking at them.”

Averland, unable to contain himself, sprang from his chair, and paced towards one of the windows. He seemed a different man, a more powerful man. In fact, Stirland realised, he was a more powerful man. His permanent stoop had gone as he stood tall, his stomach in and his chest out. He wasn’t wringing his hands, either. He was punching the fist of one into the palm of the other.

“Ever since I was a boy, I’ve been able to smell the filth that clings to the Strigany, the disease. They come to our lands, polluting our air and corrupting the morals of our womenfolk and parents.”

“Yes, well, as you say,” Stirland said, agog at the transformation in his fellow nobleman. Averland’s hatred had filled him with such a terrible energy that he was bouncing on the balls of his feet. No wonder he didn’t have any passion left for anything more wholesome.

Averland, his eyes ablaze with the captured light of the setting sun, turned back to his host, his small, neat teeth bared in a hungry smile. Stirland shifted uncomfortably, and his fingertips brushed against the hilt of his dagger, as Averland came striding towards him.

Then he relaxed as Averland slapped him on the shoulder, the gesture obviously an awkward imitation of one of Stirland's own.

"I am glad that you have seen the truth of this, my friend," Averland said. "We may have different interests, but I can see you have a rare intelligence. Not many people understand the threat the Strigany pose, the horrible, horrible threat, but we do, and as noblemen of this great Empire it is our duty to do what needs to be done."

By Sigmar's fist, thought Stirland, amazed. Spirit, camaraderie, and maybe even the ability to tell a story, I might get to like this lunatic yet.

"And what needs to be done, as you know, are the Strigany," Averland said.

"Ah, yes," Stirland said, seizing the moment. "Yes, exactly. In fact, my chancellor..."

Averland, however, was no longer listening. Instead, he was gazing rapturously back through the windows towards the sun, staring right into the burning heart of it.

"There is only one solution," he said, smiling, "and together, we can do it."

"Exactly," Stirland said, as emphatically as he could. He even slapped his palm onto the table in an effort to get Averland's attention. "Exactly what I think, too. We will exile these terrible folk from our fair lands. I even have a place in mind, an old demesne I inherited, called Flintmar."

"Exile?" Averland turned back to him, confusion clouding his flushed features. "Oh, I thought you meant... Well, never mind. Get them all in one place, and then we'll see. Yes, round them up, and then we'll see."

The fire of his passion left him. His shoulders slumped back down, and his eyes dropped to the floor. He returned to his chair, absent-mindedly wiping his hands on his tunic, and stared into his flagon of water.

"So, that's decided then," Stirland said. "Now, how about we celebrate?"

"Celebrate," Averland said vaguely, his thoughts a carnival of murderous possibilities. "Maybe later."

Stirland grunted, and, deciding that he'd had enough of diplomacy for one day, emptied his goblet of water onto the floor, refilled it with wine and started to drink.

CHAPTER FOUR

“The uglier the woman, the better the wife.”

– Strigany saying The crows had been busy. Their beaks were dark with gore, and when they flapped away from the rotten excess of their feast, their movements were heavy and slow.

Chera, of the caravan of Malfi, didn't blame the birds for their gluttony. On the contrary, she welcomed the sight of it. Ever since she had been old enough to toddle along behind her father's wagon she had regarded them as birds of good omen. Wherever she had seen crows gathered and fattened, there had been rich pickings for her family and their caravan.

Today was no exception. The dead streets of the hamlet they had discovered were alive with the birds, with rats, too, and dogs, and a flabby pig, whose owner's death had provided him with both freedom and food.

Most of the scavengers fled as the Strigany, all two dozen of them, dismounted from their wagons and entered the hamlet's main street. Only the pig remained, its tusks pink as it lifted its head from the rancid body upon which it had been feasting.

Chera watched her father unsling his blunderbuss. He had found it in a town a few weeks ago, and ever since, despite the cost of black powder, he had been like a child with a new toy. As she watched, he eagerly drew back the hammer, poured a measure of fine black powder into the firing pan, and carefully lit the fuse with his pipe. Then he took aim at the pig.

The animal looked back at him. In this part of the Empire, not even the peasants knew much about black powder, and their animals knew nothing. There was little in the pig's eyes but curiosity, and the spiral of its tail twitched in welcome.

“Don't shoot him, domnu,” Chera said, putting her hand on her father's arm. “Look how friendly he is.”

“Friendly!” her father scoffed, pulling back the hammer. “Try telling that to the man he's been eating.”

“Can't tell him anything,” Chera shrugged, “he's dead.”

“You're too soft-hearted,” Malfi told her, and aimed at the point between the pig's eyes. Then a voice spoke in his ear, and he jumped.

“We happily feast upon those who devour us,” it said, and the domnu looked down to find the wizened figure of Petru Maria, who was standing beside him. She hadn't been standing there a second before, of that he was sure.

“What's that you said?” he asked, trying to hide his surprise.

“It's what's written above the lintel of every wagon on our

caravan,” she told him. “We happily feast upon those who would devour us.”

“Has that always been our motto, Maria?” Chera asked, and the crone nodded.

“Yes, my sweetness, and we have always honoured it.”

“For Freia’s sake,” the domnu said, realising that, as usual, he had been outmanoeuvred by his daughter and Petru Maria. He lifted the blunderbuss, took aim at the corpse the pig had been feeding on, and fired.

There was a roar, a gout of red flame, and a cloud of dense black smoke. The domnu had been pushed back by the blast, and his pipe had been sent spinning out of his mouth. Chera picked it up for him, as the smoke cleared and he examined his handiwork. The corpse had been hit dead centre, its ribs and flesh splattered in a wide arc across the street. The pig was a dot racing into the distance.

“Oh, good shot daddy, I mean, domnu,” she said, handing Malfi back his pipe.

“Yes, well,” he said, patting the stock of his gun with the absent-minded fondness of a man for a favourite child. “We’ve wasted enough time. Let’s get on with it. It’s a fine day, so let’s start with putting everything on the street, bodies and loot both.”

Chera gave his arm a quick squeeze of affection, and then joined the rest of the Strigany as they went to work. Like all of them, she wore an oiled apron, and thick leather gloves, the tops of which flared out almost to her elbows. A few of the other Strigany wore bandanas around their mouths, but not many, and not Chera. The smell of rotting corpses was something that she had long been accustomed to, and even the plague held no terrors for her. In Main’s caravan, you either died of the plague young or not at all. Beneath the ragged thatch of her hair, Chera’s pinched features bore testament to her victory over the plague. They were still marked with a cicatrice of pale scars, the white marks and pock marks the ghosts of the disease she had overcome.

The people she found within the darkness of the first house had not been so lucky. Even though the stinking confines of the house were lit only by the meagre strip of daylight that came through the door, Chera could see that there were at least three generations of a family, rotting together, as closely as they had once lived.

The adults lay on the floor, their bodies twisted like driftwood amongst the meagre furniture. Chera assumed that they had been the last to go, because the beds were sodden with the decaying remains of their children.

She examined them, and saw that their bodies bore testament to the sickness that had been their ruin. Their throats were swollen into

thick, choking collars, their eyes were red marbles of burst blood vessels, and their bodies were cratered with suppurating sores.

It was the plague, all right.

Chera reflexively quashed the feeling of sympathy she had. These were bodies, that was all. They weren't people: not the little boy who clung to his grandmother's bloated neck, not the husband who lay cradling his wife, and not the girl who had died strangely alone, huddled in a corner.

No, they weren't people. They were bodies that had to be destroyed so that people could live.

Chera carried on telling herself that as she wielded the long pole of her billhook, snagging the steel hook into the first body and dragging it out onto the street. Then, she went in to fetch the next, and the next, and, as she carried on with this grisly work, it became easier and easier for her to forget about the nausea that twisted within her chest.

Some others were losing that struggle with their instincts. Chera heard the sounds of their vomiting or of sobbing weaving through the bump and the slither of their grisly work.

That was all right, she thought, that was good. They were Strigany, which meant that they were tough enough to work through their suffering. Anyway, as Petru Maria said, it was only when you lost that feeling of horror altogether that you had to worry. Although she never said what exactly you had to worry about, Chera believed her.

She dragged the last body out of the house she had chosen, took a deep breath of relatively fresh air, and went back indoors to complete the more agreeable part of her task.

After so many years, she had an instinctive knack for where to look. Her fingers rustled through the stinking bedding as eagerly as if it had been sweet corn, and when her fingers closed around the purse of copper coins she smiled. She counted them, and then dropped them into the pouch in her apron.

Next, she turned to the tools that hung from one wall. The man had been a cobbler, by the look of it, and Chera wasted no time in bundling the tools of his trade into a blanket. After that, she looked through the cooking area. There was nothing worth having, but for the copper pot that rested on a huge clay brick stove. She dropped the cobbler's tools into it, and prepared to drag it out into the street.

That was when she heard the noise from within the stove.

It was a wordless sound of pure animal panic. A bird that had flown down the cold chimney and become trapped, perhaps, or a cat locked away by its owners during their delirium.

Then the sound came again, and Chera, deciding that the thick

leather of her gloves would be proof against either beaks or claws, went to open the stove door. There was a flurry of movement from inside, and the small creature shrieked as it was exposed. The thing extended two hands to ward her off, and Chera realised that it was not a thing at all. It was a child.

As always, when she met somebody who was not from her caravan, Chera instinctively raised her hands to cover her pockmarked face. Then, seeing how terrified the child was, she dropped her hands and smiled.

“Hello,” she said, and dropped to her knees. “What are you doing in there?”

The child made no reply. In the gloom of the stove, and beneath the soot that covered it, there was no way of telling if it was a boy or a girl. The flat shine of its terrified eyes could have belonged to either sex, and the tangled nest of its hair gave no clue.

“I’m Chera. My people have come here to help you. What’s your name?”

The only reply was a lowering of the hands, and a drawing up of the skinny legs. The child peered over the scraped knees, as if hiding behind them.

“Are you hungry?” Chera asked. “We can go and eat some porridge if you want, with honey in it. It’s my favourite. What’s yours?”

For the first time, the youngster dragged its gaze away from Chera for long enough to scan the room beyond. She was thankful that she’d cleared the room of the child’s family before finding it.

No, not the family, she automatically corrected herself, the remains of the family.

“I think that you should come with me,” she said, edging a little closer to the stove. “I’ll look after you.”

“Where’s Franzi?”

The voice was no more than a whisper, but it was enough to tighten Chera’s throat with sympathy.

“There is nobody here anymore,” she said. “Who was Franzi?”

“My brother,” the girl whispered from within the darkness of her hiding place. “He’s only little. We shouldn’t leave him on his own.”

Chera thought about the little body that she had found curled up in the chill embrace of its grandmother’s dead arms. She blinked.

“They’ve all gone to Morr’s garden,” she said. “Franzi will be all right there. Now, come along. Come and eat something. We’ll look after you now.”

She reached forward, and for a moment the girl drew back. Then, coming to a sudden decision, she leapt forward, wriggling out of the stove to throw herself against Chera’s stained leather apron, and wrap

her arms around her neck.

“Good girl,” Chera said and, drawing a blanket over the child’s head, took her quickly away from the rotting remains of her old life, and to the beginnings of her new one. By early afternoon, Domnu Malfi’s caravan had picked the plague-blighted hamlet clean.

The festering remains of the inhabitants lay stacked in the street, like so much cordwood, and their valuables had been collected, cleaned, divided up and stowed in the wagons. They included the girl that Chera had found. Petru Maria had taken the child, bustling her into her wagon, as eager as a mother hen with a lost chick. She would care for the orphan until a family could be found who would take her.

As the Strigany finished dusting the heaped bodies with the corpse powder that would make them burn, the petru returned. She stood on a barrel so that she could see down the festering lines of the dead, and, although she held a black-bound book of Morr in one hand, she didn’t bother opening it. The blessing that she recited over the dead was the old one, the usual one, the one that she had recited a hundred times before.

Although the words were old, the crone’s impassioned recitation was as fresh as blood on snow.

“We are all made by the gods,” she began, when everybody had gathered around, “strong or weak, fair or foul, man or woman. Whatever we do in this life it is no more than the will of our creators, for we owe them everything.”

Even before she had finished the sentence, her whiskered lips drew back over her remaining fangs, in a snarl of derision.

“At least, that is what they would have us believe,” she scoffed, with such feeling that the words might have been her own, and not those written in the book that nobody else had ever read, “but even the gods have their time, and not even they can escape the Garden of Morr. Nor should they.”

Her clawed and blue-veined fingers scratched towards the sky as she continued, as though she was lecturing the gods.

“To each of us is allotted a time, and the will to make of it what we will. When that time is finished, and when that will is gone, then our work is finished. By then, we have made ourselves the house that we shall dwell in within the Eternal Gardens beyond.”

The crone paused to draw breath, her bony chest heaving with passion. Her people waited, heads bowed, and when she spoke again, her voice soared and rolled, and thundered in a way that should have been impossible for one with such a skinny frame.

“As we prepare to tidy away after the lives that these people have led, we can be sure that Morr is already guiding them to those dwelling places. Some will be wonderful, others won’t, but whatever

these people find in that world will make the suffering of this one seem as fleeting as a nightmare, and the joys no more than a cool breeze on a hot day.”

The petru raised her hands in final benediction, and, as the Reikspiel she had spoken gave way to the incomprehensible hacking of the old tongue, she gesticulated over the ranked bodies as wildly as only a Strigany woman knows how.

It was only as she finished this final catechism that the Strigany realised that they were no longer alone.

The horsemen had come along the road that led out of hamlet and into the forest beyond. One look at them was enough to tell Domnu Malfi that, whatever they were, these horsemen were no merchants, far from it.

They had the lean and hungry look of professional soldiers: mercenaries, by the look of their ragged mismatch of uniforms, or maybe even bandits, Malfi thought, uneasily. Each of the men carried a lance, and each was harnessed with a unique collection of armour. The steel plates had the battered, ill-fitting look of loot.

Their leader, a grey and grim-faced man with an incongruously colourful feather stuck into his hat, saw Malfi, just as Malfi saw him. He reined in his horse and raised his hand to stop the column that followed him.

He and the domnu regarded each other for a moment. Then the mercenary looked down at the street full of corpses. His eyes rested on one of the smaller bodies, and, if anything, his face grew even stonier.

Malfi took a step forward.

“Good day, menheer,” he called out to the mercenary, his voice relentlessly cheerful.

The man looked at him, studying him as if he was something that had been left dead by the side of the road. For a moment, Malfi didn’t think that the warrior would reply, but, before he could think of anything else to say, the man did reply with a single, damning word.

“Murderers,” the mercenary pronounced.

Main felt his stomach drop, and he exchanged an anxious glance with the men beside him.

“No. No, that’s not what happened,” he called out, his hands spread in a placating gesture. “We are plague eaters. Look, you can see that we have been cleaning this town of the plague’s victims.”

“They even murdered the babes,” another of the riders said, ignoring him. “Strigany filth! Thank Sigmar we are finally to be rid of them.”

“We shouldn’t stand for this, captain,” another man added, his voice tight with hatred. “There’s no mistaking death by poison. I bet the Strigany poisoned their well and then robbed the bodies. We

should do more than just move them on.”

The captain said nothing. Malfi looked past him, and tried to decide how many were in the column behind. More than a dozen, definitely, but how many?

Resisting the urge to level his blunderbuss at the men, he squared his shoulders, and decided to become outraged.

“I have explained to you,” Malfi said, taking a step forwards, “that we are plague eaters. We provide a service for the Empire that none other will. And who might you be, who are so at home amongst the vapours of the plague?”

It was too late for words, however. Even as Malfi was speaking, the captain lifted his hat to reveal the steel skull cap beneath. His men reacted to the gesture immediately, their lances lowering as the feather in their leader’s hat described a blur of colour through the air.

Malfi cursed. For a moment, he wondered if these thugs genuinely disbelieved him, or if they were just seeking an excuse to plunder his caravan. Then he put such distractions from his mind.

“They’re going to charge,” somebody said behind him, and, as if those words had been the signal, the captain drew his hat down, and his men started to trot forwards.

“Ushoran preserve us,” somebody said, and Malfi could hear the fear in the man’s voice. He turned to find that some of his people had already started to retreat, scuttling down the street to the imagined safety of their wagons.

Every instinct in Malfi’s body urged him to follow them, but he knew better. There was no running from cavalry. They either stood their ground or they died.

“Ierva, Mallik, Blythe, hold your ground!” he bellowed. “You know better than that.”

A command was shouted from the other end of the street, and the riders closed in, forming dressed ranks.

Malfi unslung the blunderbuss from his shoulder, and turned around to face his people. He was chilled with the sudden realisation of how old the grandparents were and how young the children.

Still, they were Strigany. They would fight.

“Right, here’s how it is,” he barked, his eyes glinting with the controlled terror of battle. “We either run and let them kill us all, and they will kill us when they catch us on the open road, or we take them here.”

“So, we hold our ground?” It was Chera who asked, and Malfi was simultaneously proud and dismayed to see how fearless his daughter looked.

“No,” Malfi said, and turned back up the cluttered street, “we hold that ground.”

The domnu pointed to the rows of neatly stacked corpses, the abandoned hay carts, the stacked barrels, and all the other obstructions that littered the street.

"We'll take 'em at close quarters," he said, grinning, "and they won't know what hit them. Remember, go for the horses first."

The horsemen quickened their pace, and, a moment later, the sound of their hooves was echoing off the walls of the hamlet. There were more than twenty of them, Malfi realised as they trotted forward. More than twenty armed, trained and mounted professional killers; no wonder they looked so confident.

They remained confident even when their formation disintegrated amongst the clutter of the street. This lapse certainly didn't bother their captain. Incredibly, he was smiling as his horse jinked its way towards the Strigany. It wasn't until he realised that the Strigany weren't fleeing from this clumsy charge that his smile faltered.

Then, he saw what Malfi held cradled in his arms, and the smile left his face altogether, slipping away like a rat from a sinking ship.

Suddenly realising what a mistake it had been to fall into this battleground, the mercenary dug his heels in and began to raise his hand. Before he could complete the gesture, Malfi levelled his gun and fired.

The gout of flame threw shadows skittering across the walls, even as the spray of steel chopped into the mercenary and his horse. The range was close enough for the impact to hurl both animal and man tumbling backwards, and they crashed into the rest of their squadron.

Malfi, his head ringing, half hoped that such a well-placed shot might have knocked the heart out of his enemies, but it was not to be. If anything, it merely seemed to encourage them and, howling with rage, they urged their reluctant horses forward.

"Charge!" one of them cried, digging his heels into his mount as it leapt over a cart. Behind him, his comrades urged their nervous horses into an awkward gallop, even as one of them tripped and fell with a scream and the snap of breaking fetlocks.

Malfi roared his defiance and drew his sword. Then he charged forwards, leading his people to battle amongst the piled corpses of this blighted town. Chera wanted to run, wanted to hide. The horsemen looked huge as they bore down on her, and she felt a moment of sheer panic as she saw the steel tips of their lances. Every single one of them seemed to be pointing directly at her.

However, the sight of her father rushing forward to meet the murderous onslaught cured her of that fear. By some strange alchemy of the soul, her terror became hatred, and a moment later, her hatred became strength.

She realised that she was screaming a challenge, as she rushed

forwards, her billhook held over her shoulder like a woodsman's axe. Although the weight of the tool usually made even lifting it an effort, now she wielded it with an adrenaline-fuelled strength that made it feel as light as a fencing sword. She swung the polearm down in a lethal arc, and before she even knew what was happening, she was killing.

The first man she took was about thirty. He had a hooked nose and a blond beard that needed a trim. His eyes were blue, and he was riding a bay horse. The armour plate he wore on his chest was dimpled where rust had been scrubbed off.

Chera saw these details in a single flash that burned them into her memory, even as she twisted away from the thrust of his lance. She used the momentum of her spinning body to chop the billhook into his neck, and she pulled at his dead weight just as she would have pulled at the dead weight of a three week-old corpse.

The steel tip bit deep into the muscles of the mercenary's neck, and he screamed as he was dragged from the saddle. Chera screamed back and instinctively tried to free her hook from his neck. When it came loose, it was through a rip of flesh and a spray of blood that splashed against her leather apron.

She stood and watched the man, who lay ruined and dying at her feet. He watched her back, eyes pleading. Then he was gone.

The rage that had driven Chera to the act ebbed, and she was left trembling with nausea over the corpse of her first kill. As the battle surged around her, she stood, staring blindly at him, and the haft of her bloodied billhook started to slip through her hands.

Before it could fall, she felt cool, bony fingers close around hers. She started, and then looked down into the still, dark eyes of her petru. It was like looking over a precipice into some dark, terrible void.

"Well done, my darling," the old woman said, and Chera felt her nausea pass, her shaking hands becoming firm. Her victim forgotten, she could hear the cries, screams, and howls of battle, the endless clatter of steel and stone, and wood.

"Kill them," Petru Maria told her, her wrinkled face twisted with a burning intensity, "before they can kill us."

Then Chera saw the horseman who had appeared behind the old woman. He kicked his heels into his horse's flanks as he aimed his bloodied spear tip at her back.

"Maria," Chera yelled, "watch out."

The old woman turned. She gestured as lazily as if she were shooing away a fly, and spoke a single word to the horse.

The animal screamed and reared back, as though from a branding iron. It spun around, its hooves slipping on the cobbles, and bolted

down the street. Its rider dropped his lance as he tried to hang on, deaf to the curses of his comrades as he fled past them.

"Come with me, my sweetheart," Petru Maria said, beckoning to Chera with one gnarled finger as she stalked forwards to find more victims. Around her, the street was a confusion of debris and struggling forms.

In the open, the lancers would have slaughtered their ragged opponents as easily as they had hoped, spearing them where they stood, or running them down as they fled.

Here, though, things were different. In the confines of the village, the Strigany fought with the brutal, direct expertise of born street fighters. They jinked amongst the piled corpses and scattered debris on the street, dodging the jabbing lances and arcing swords of their foes to cut their horses out from beneath them. Tendons were sliced. Bellies were opened. Soon, the screams of the horses were loud enough to drown out both the confused orders that the mercenaries were shouting at each other, and their screams for assistance as, one by one, they found themselves isolated, and surrounded by the Strigany.

Chera followed Petru Maria through the bloodied chaos of the street, and even through the horror she felt at the grisly task she had to perform, she was amazed by the petru's enthusiasm. The old woman grinned and hummed merrily as she slipped unseen through the battle, the blades she held in her withered, liver-spotted hands in constant motion as she stabbed, sliced and severed.

Her smile didn't fade until the mercenaries began to retreat, their courage suddenly snapping. Some of them fled on foot, leaving their crippled mounts amongst the carnage of battle. Others galloped in a confused line back up the road they had come by.

A ragged jeer went up from amongst the Strigany. Maria simply spat, shrugged and turned to Chera.

"Well, my poppet," she said, smiling sweetly. "Your first kill. Good girl."

"No," Chera said, looking from the bodies of their victims to the carnage beyond. "This isn't right. It can't be right, to kill each other like this. Things shouldn't be this way."

The petru looked at her, a terrible pity in her eyes.

"But they are," she said, her honesty as blunt as a cudgel. "They are this way."

"Petru Maria!" a voice called, and the old woman turned to see Malfi walking towards her, holding a roll of parchment in his hand. "I found this proclamation on the body of the captain. Look, it's got a seal, and it says something about us, about all Strigany. Can you come and read it for me?"

So it was that, surrounded by the cold corpses of their clients and the warmer ones of their foes, Malfi's caravan learned of the terror that lay ahead of them. As the pyres had burned to a greasy ash, Malfi's caravan had withdrawn back down the road that had led them here. When the smell of the burning corpses no longer followed them, there they stopped, circled their wagons, and waited while the wagon masters went to Malfi's caravan to discuss what to do next.

Chera, having no place at the council, made her way through the dusk to Maria's wagon. Once there, she lit a lantern, and watched the sleeping child she had saved from the plague-blighted village. The girl had been cleaned, and her hair braided, and now she slept the sleep of the truly innocent. Not wanting to wake the child, Chera resisted the temptation to stroke the smooth skin of her flawless cheeks.

They were a stark reminder of her own ravaged features. The strain of contagion she had caught had been a virulent one, virulent enough to have killed her mother. Only the art of Petru Maria had kept Chera alive, stemming the fevers and the buboes that had wracked her frame, and since then the two had been devoted to each other.

Although Chera had seen enough of death to be thankful for every breath of life she drew, she wondered what the future would bring. No husband, that was for sure; at seventeen she was of marriageable age, but the only glances she drew from men were of pity or curiosity.

At least, so she believed.

She sighed and looked at the peachy complexion of the sleeping child.

"You're a lucky little thing," she said.

"What's so lucky about her?"

Chera jumped, and looked around guiltily. Maria emerged from the shadows by the wagon's entrance.

"Maria! I thought you were at council?"

"I was," the old woman said. "It didn't last long. We are going to keep off the road until we can find out what the others are doing. These aristocrats are as demented as mad dogs at the best of times, but this Averland..." She trailed off, letting the venom in her tone do the talking.

"So it's true, then?" Chera asked. "We are banished?"

Maria shrugged her bony shoulders.

"Perhaps. We will see. But tell me, lieblich, what is so lucky about this little girl?"

Chera blushed.

"Nothing. It was a silly thing to say especially after all she has lost."

Maria nodded, and tugged at the whiskers on her chin.

"Well, if you won't tell me, you won't," she said, "but perhaps you'd brew some camomile for me. The weather's changing tonight. It always makes my water ache."

"Of course, Maria," Chera said, and started bustling about with the tea things.

"She is a beautiful child," Maria said to herself as Chera put the kettle on the brazier. "Perfectly formed. Look at her cheeks, like peaches."

Chera said nothing as she spooned dried herbs into the kettle.

"I remember," Maria said, sitting back and watching Chera from beneath hooded eyes, "when you were a little girl. You were exactly the same, skin as white and as smooth as fresh cream."

Chera bit her lip as she stirred the camomile into the warming water. She swallowed. Suddenly, for no reason whatever, she could feel tears welling up inside her.

It must have been the bloodshed today, she told herself as she turned, and busied herself looking for the tea strainer. Of course I'm upset, all that violence.

Maria's eyes glittered like a hawk's.

"You were such a beautiful little girl, and now you're a beautiful woman."

Chera snorted, and a tear rolled down one of her cheeks. She felt the warmth of it zigzag across the ridges of her scars, and suddenly her vision blurred. She blinked hard, took a deep breath, and stirred the tea.

When she spoke her voice was level.

"I know that you are trying to be kind, Maria, but we both know that that isn't true. I am scarred, ugly, hideous. And don't say anything about true beauty being on the inside, or souls meeting, or that stupid old saying."

"Of course I won't," Maria said, and watched Chera pouring the tea. "It's a load of old rubbish anyway. Beauty isn't on the inside. It isn't anywhere. Only poets know the truth about beauty, although they never tell it.

"The truth about beauty," Maria said, wrapping her arthritis-knotted fingers around the cup that Chera gave her, "is that it's a lie."

Chera wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, and poured her own cup.

"No, it isn't a lie," she said, miserably. "Men look at you. They see if you're beautiful or not."

Maria, who had just taken a mouthful of tea, choked, coughed, and then spat it out.

"Men!" she repeated, horrified at Chera's naiveté. "What do they

know about anything? Nothing. They're worse than children. What difference does it make what shape your nose is as long as you can smell? None. What difference does it make if you've got breasts like melons or saddlebags, as long as your hips are wide enough? None. Men are idiots, and beauty is a lie."

Chera sniffed, and looked away as Maria, content to have set the record straight, slurped at her tea.

"I'm sorry, Maria," she said. "It's just that I want a husband, and, let's be honest, with this face, I won't get one. I'll never be in love, or have babies. I'll grow old, all alone. It isn't the worst thing, I know it isn't. It's just that sometimes... Oh, let's not talk about it."

Maria sipped her tea. She had been wondering how long it would take for them to have this conversation, and was glad it had finally come. If Chera had been another type of girl, it would have come years sooner, but then, if Chera had been another type of girl, Maria wouldn't be so keen to help.

"If you want a husband," Maria said at length, "all you have to do is to ask, my darling. It's simple enough. No more difficult than charming an animal. Easier, usually."

Chera shook her head emphatically.

"No. No, not that way. What's the point? I want a man to want me for who I am, not because he's been forced."

"By Ushoran, girl, I've never heard such nonsense in my life. Don't blush, you know it's true. Men don't want any girl for who she is. They want her because of who they want her to be."

Chera looked into the tea leaves at the bottom of her cup. There was no solace to be found in them. Even so, her jaw hardened.

"I won't ensnare a man with your arts, Maria. I wouldn't want one that was taken that way, and maybe I will find somebody without them, one day."

Maria grunted.

"You've changed your tune, my girl. If you won't let me make things easy, that's fine. I suppose you wouldn't refuse some cosmetic help. The gods know, there's not a woman alive who would."

Chera looked at the petru suspiciously.

"Can you fix my skin?" she asked. "I mean, properly? Permanently? I didn't think you could do that sort of thing. Last time I asked you said you couldn't."

Maria said nothing, but just looked at the sleeping child, the peasant child whom she had known for less than an hour. Then she looked at Chera, who had been so much more than a daughter to her. Then she came to a decision. It wasn't difficult, not as difficult as it should have been.

"Of course I can fix your skin," she said. "It's just a tricky potion

to make, that's all, but it can be done, Ushoran willing."

From what I know of that black-hearted devil, Maria thought grimly as she looked again at the sleeping child, he'd be willing enough. As always, it would only be a matter of choosing the right currency.

She sighed, and cracked all ten of her knuckles. Then she leaned back against the wooden walls of her home and lowered her eyelids. Although Mannslieb was already riding high, it was still too early. Such a dark deed needed an even darker night, if only so that she could hide from her reflection in the puddles in the road on the way back.

Love, the petru thought, as Chera kissed her goodnight and left the wagon. Only the gods could have inflicted such a perfect curse on the world of mortals.

Although the smoke from the bodies that the Strigany had burnt had long since cleared, the smell of the burning still clung to the blood-greased streets and hollowed-out dwellings of the village. It clung to the shadows that stalked among the ruins, too. Hungry shadows, whose appetites had outgrown their cowardice, as Morrslieb set between the jagged spires of the forest to the south.

Although their cowardice might have been eclipsed, it still throbbed in their movements. They skittered about among the remains of the dead, with the cringing gait of beaten dogs, their teeth glistening in the night, as brightly as the stars that glittered overhead. Their cowardice showed in their stealth, too, and in their silence. Apart from the snuffling of their noses and the occasional slobbering as they found another morsel amongst the ash, they moved as soundlessly as nightmares.

They heard the woman approaching when she was still almost half a mile away. They froze, eyes wide and ears twitching as she approached. Then the wind turned, and their noses wrinkled at the familiar smell.

Their disappointment was short-lived. By the time the small, bundled figure of the old woman had stepped out of the night, which was as dark as the pits of their eyes, the creatures were busy about the remains of the dead. They knew her of old, this one, and not even the most desperate of them dared to do so much as to look into the horrible, flaying brightness of her eyes.

Then the swaddled bundle, which she was carrying with such surprising ease, stirred, and muttered something in its drugged sleep. It was a soft sound, barely audible above the wind that whined through the straw roofs of the dead houses. No matter how soft it was, though, it had the same electrifying effect as a spot of blood dropped into a pool of sharks. Cowards though they were, the things that had gathered looked up from the cold comforts of their feast. Some hesitated, but most started to close in, the hooks of their ancient appetites drawing them towards the bundle that the old woman carried, as irresistibly as moths to a flame.

They circled around her, silent as ever, apart from the clip of their claws on the cobbles, and the hiss of their excited breathing.

The old woman didn't slacken in her pace as she walked though them. Nor did she speed up. She merely glanced at the twisted form of the thing that had made the mistake of stepping in front of her, pointed an arthritic finger towards it, and muttered a single, terrible word.

It was still screaming as she walked over to its twitching body, stamping down with her hobnailed boots to feel the satisfying snap of bone.

She smiled, pleased to have been distracted from thoughts of the awful bargain she was about to make.

The smile died on her face as, to a chorus of sudden whimpers from the carrion eaters, a form emerged from the doorway of one of the houses. Even with eyes as sharp as needles in the dark, the old woman couldn't make out more than the outline of its shape, for which she was thankful. Anyway, she didn't need eyes to see it with. It radiated such a sense of raw, murderous power that its presence throbbed in her mind with the same dull insistence as a rotten tooth.

She curtsied, her mouth suddenly dry.

"My Lord Ushoran," she hissed, her voice little more than a death rattle, "I bring you tribute, and I ask for a favour."

With that, she laid down the form of the bundle she carried, returning the child that Chera had taken to the fate that had found it.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Revenge is a delicacy to be enjoyed at leisure. Retribution is a duty that will not wait.”

– Inscription found on a Strigany dagger “Good girl,” Dannie said, leaning forward to whisper into his mare’s ears. They framed the path along which she was galloping, racing along it with wild abandon. “Good girl. You can do it.”

The mare bunched her shoulders, and leapt over the fallen trunk that blocked the deer path. Her hooves sparked against shale as she landed, and then she turned to hurtle around the bend that cut through the trees ahead.

Like all the forests that clung to the barren slopes beneath the Grey Mountains, this one was sparse and ill-favoured. Only the most stubborn of evergreens could live on the poor soil, and the trees that did manage to survive were bent and misshapen.

The shadows the trees cast were thick and black, but the bars of sunlight that cut through them flickered across Dannie’s face. When the sunlight hit him, his hazel eyes glowed as yellow a tiger’s, and his mane of black hair took on a raven’s wing sheen.

“Good girl,” he whispered again, resting his hands on his mare’s neck. He had known her ever since she had been a foal, and, as always, he was riding her like a true Strigany, with neither saddle nor bridle. He could feel her pulse as it pounded beneath his fingers and thighs. He could feel her terror, too. It matched his own.

The mare took the corner fast, too fast. Her hooves skittered across a sudden slide of shale, and her legs almost went from under her. Dannie reacted instinctively, twisting to one side to help her to keep her balance, and then she was away again, ears laying back flat as she sped forward.

He didn’t like the way her breath was beginning to sound, or the way that the sweat that soaked her fur was starting to foam. She was a good old girl, but not meant for the gallop, especially not on these treacherous paths. Maybe it was time to drop her pace.

He snatched a look back over his shoulder, and any thoughts of slowing down vanished.

Despite the suicidal speed with which they had been tearing through the switchback circuits of the deer paths, the pursuing boars had drawn even closer to them. He thought that there were about half a dozen of them in pursuit, half a dozen of the ugliest animals Dannie had ever seen.

The first one was so close that he could see the murderous glint in its piggy eyes. The thick fur of its mane bristled as it powered

forwards, its thick legs and low centre of gravity ideal for this rugged terrain. As Dannie watched, the animal burst through a spill of sunlight, and he could see the saliva that glistened on its tusks.

But if the boar was ugly, its rider was positively grotesque. Despite the mottled green skin that showed through its rags, and despite the simian stoop of its misshapen body, the orc looked more boar than humanoid. It had the same vicious little piggy eyes and the same yellow-fanged snarl.

Dannie's mare whinnied a warning. He turned in time to duck beneath the branch that would have cracked his head open.

"Thanks, girl," he whispered, and wondered what to do. He knew that there would be no outrunning the boars. His mare was almost winded, while the boars looked as though they could roll along at the same speed all day.

He reached down and touched the head of the hatchet that he wore on his belt. It gave him a feeling of comfort, although he knew that the feeling was misplaced.

His mare slowed as she rounded another corner, but this time, after she had taken it, she didn't accelerate away. She couldn't. Her flanks heaved in and out as she sucked in air, trying to fuel the burning muscles that could barely manage a canter.

Dannie resisted the urge to dig his heels in. It wouldn't do any good. Then he remembered the pack he carried, still bulging with next week's provisions, and cursed himself for a fool. He couldn't believe he had made her carry the weight of it thus far.

"Sorry old girl," he said and, shrugging the pack off his back, he threw it behind him. The leather split as it hit the ground, spilling dried fruit and jerky everywhere, but Dannie didn't see it. His eyes were locked on the boar that was barely twenty feet behind them.

Then, like some miracle from a petru's story, the animal halted, stopping so suddenly that the orc that rode it was sent flying over its head. Lumps of the boar's mane remained in its green clawed fists, and both it and the animal squealed with pain.

Dannie watched, as, pausing only to snarl at its erstwhile rider, the boar lowered its head to start gobbling up the strips of jerky. Those behind it, their noses as finely tuned to the aromas of such delicacies as their leader's, soon joined the feast.

Dannie's mare jinked through a bend, and the last he saw of his pursuers was the sight of two boars turning on each other to fight over the leather of his satchel. Their riders were too busy to try to break it up. Their harsh-tongued recriminations had already turned to violence.

Their squeals of rage, pain and greed followed him down the deer path, and Dannie realised that he was laughing, laughing so hard that

it hurt. Tears ran down his cheeks, and he leant down to cling to his mare's neck so that he wouldn't fall.

Gradually, he got himself under control, and, realising that the pursuit was over, he soothed his mare down to a walk, and then slipped off her back to walk beside her. They soon reached the stream that they had followed up into the hills from their caravan. They stopped by a pool, where Dannie let his horse drink.

He could feel her breathing returning to normal as she relaxed, and he felt the euphoria of pure relief.

"That was a damn close-run thing," he told her, "and damned lucky. I think that the fates have something in store for us."

He patted his mare on the shoulder, and led the way back towards the wagons of his domnu's caravan, the sun drying his shirt on his back. The first sign that something was wrong was the smoke, not that smoke wasn't one of the constant aromas that clung to a Strigany encampment. The first thing that any caravan did when it stopped was to build fires for cooking and for light, and for telling stories over.

The smoke that rose from beyond the hill where Dannie's caravan had made camp was wrong. There was too much of it, for one thing, great billowing clouds that drifted far up into the clear blue of the midmorning sky. No Strigany would have wasted fuel on such an inferno.

The smell was wrong, too. It was acrid, as if somebody was burning paint or varnish as well as wood. There was even a hint of burnt meat. It reminded Dannie of something that he didn't want to remember.

Putting it to the back of his mind, he swung himself up onto his mare.

He'd been walking alongside her ever since their escape from the boar riders the day before, and her wind was back. As soon as he touched his heels to her flank, she broke into a trot, and then a canter.

"It's nothing to worry about, old girl," Dannie told her. "They're probably just clearing some ground, using varnish to set the green wood on fire."

The mare slowed as she started climbing the hill. They had passed the last copse of trees at dawn, and, ever since, there had been nothing but the close-cropped pastureland that covered the hills in a velvet carpet.

"It could be a lantern fire," Dannie muttered, unconsciously lifting his head to see over the ridge of the hill. "Somebody could have dropped a lantern, or spilt some paraffin, or..."

The mare had stopped at the crest of the hill. Dannie gazed down on the camp site.

It was a moment that he would never forget. Years later he would still find himself waking from nightmares born of the memory, his skin pale and his blankets soaked with sweat. Sometimes the horror would even find him in the clear light of day, coming from nowhere to break the peace of the present with visions of the past. When that happened, even those whom he later learned to love would avoid him, waiting for the embers of his rage to die back down.

On the actual morning, and at the actual place, he felt neither rage nor sorrow. What he felt was numbness: bone deep and complete.

The burning remains of the wagons were laid out, just as they had been when he had left to go hunting. Although the canvas and wood of each wagon was no more than a burning ruin, he could still tell which family had owned each, just by their position.

His heels seemed to move of their own volition, and he clipped them into the mare's flanks. She responded reluctantly her ears fluttering nervously as she descended towards the holocaust below.

As Dannie drew nearer, the pall of smoke that hung over the ruins of his caravan enveloped him, the sting of it bringing tears to his eyes. He peered through it, and for the first time he saw the charred bundles that lay amongst the burning wagons. He realised where the burnt meat smell was coming from, and what meat it was that was being burnt.

His mare hesitated at the perimeter of the encampment. It hadn't been fortified. Why would it have been? Dannie's people had stopped here many times in the past, and the only people they'd seen had been shepherds, weathered men glad of the chance to trade some mutton for pipe weed, and for company to smoke it with.

Dannie looked at the churned-up ground that lay between the burning wreckage of the Striganies' wagons. Through the haze of his shock, he had guessed that the things that had done this had been the same ones who had almost caught him the day before. Now, he could see that he was wrong. The ground had been cut up by horses' hooves, and steel-shod ones at that.

"Hold," he told his mare, and slipped from her back. He bent down to study the hoof prints. He wanted to remember the size of them, the pattern, and the number of nails the blacksmith had used.

Then he came across the bloody smear of one of the drag marks that led to a burning wagon, and the strength bled from his legs. He collapsed onto the ground, and sat there in silence, his legs out in front of him, his head in his hands.

The sun rolled across the clear blue sky ahead. The fires roared and spluttered. Then they collapsed into piles of glowing ash, red-hot nails and soft, chalky bones. The first of the stars emerged. In the distance a fox barked.

When the chill of night fell upon him, he started to shiver. His mare, who had wandered off to graze, came back. She sniffed at him, and nibbled a lock of his hair. Then she lay down behind him so that he had her warmth and solidity at his back.

When morning came, Dannie got to his feet, and, burned-out pyre by burned-out pyre, said blessings over the ashes of his people, the aunties and uncles, and cousins and friends who had raised him since his own parents had died; the domnu who had given him permission to leave the caravan when he had, and the petru who had taken him as an apprentice and begun to teach him his trade.

Only then did he start to think about revenge. Dannie caught up with the raiders two days later. It had been an easy enough pursuit. They had made no effort to hide their tracks, and the weight of their loot and the plodding pace of the stolen carthorses had slowed them down.

It was the deep crescent hoof prints of his people's horses that Dannie had followed. Them and them alone. That was why he had never lost his quarry, even at the ford where they had crossed through the confusion of other tracks, or on muddied crossroads he had come across this morning.

His pursuit over, he lay flat on top of a ridge, the sun warm on his neck and the grass soft beneath him. The keep to which the raiders had returned lay perhaps half a mile away. It was a squat block with a slanting tile roof, one of the many fortified manor houses that were scattered across the grasslands that lay between Altdorf and the Grey Mountains.

There wasn't much to the fortress, just two storeys topped with a red tile roof, and a wooden stockade for the horses. Inside there would be a garrison of perhaps two dozen men, and the tax collector or administrator of some local prince.

For all he knew, Dannie's caravan might even have stopped at this very place, to trade in trinkets or spirits, or music.

He was wondering about that when, with a shock that hit him like a punch in the stomach, he realised that those days were gone. Valli would make no more trinkets. The petru would make no more spirits. The harps and flutes of the Skudu brothers had burnt with their bones.

All of them were gone. The caravan was gone. All that remained was him, some windblown ashes and the carthorses that he could see within the stockade.

The sun lost its warmth on Dannie's neck, and the ground beneath him felt as hard as a slab of stone. He wiped a hand across his eyes, blinked, and tried to concentrate on the tower. At that moment, a cold eastern wind lifted the banner on the battlements, and he saw the

device upon it: nine golden balls on a black field.

Deciding that he had seen enough, he slithered back down to where his mare was patiently grazing. He slipped onto her back and dug his heels in.

He knew what he had to do. Although the thought of it was terrifying, it was as nothing compared to the emptiness, the unbearable, amputated emptiness that the raiders had left him.

Well, he thought as he cantered east, they will pay. They will pay in such full measure that I could almost feel sorry for them... almost.

He dug his heels in even harder, and his hair flattened as the mare broke into a gallop.

CHAPTER SIX

“As hard as steel
Though never seen breaking?
Made to last
Though never through making?”

– Strigany riddle Domnu Brock’s caravan opened for business. Every single member of the caravan knew his or her job. They also knew that the first day of business had to be carefully managed.

There were the clusters of children who had spent the previous day collecting flowers, and who went to distribute both blooms and invitations to the good wives of the town. There were the two men who had been dispatched to give the mayor a demijohn of brandy, and to find out if he might have any other, more entangling desires.

Back in the encampment, other Strigany, who had spent the previous day testing the wind, used the embers of the watch fire to build the roasting pit. It was positioned perfectly to catch the breeze, and by lunchtime the rare smell of spiced roast goat would fill the streets of the town to set mouths watering.

As well as these old tricks there were a dozen other enticements. Some of the girls heated the blood of Lerenstein’s watchmen with flashes of warm thighs and even warmer glances. Meanwhile, the musicians had started to strum out the first of the tunes on their lutes, and Ursus, the caravan’s dancing bear, yawned and stretched, preparing to earn the scraps of honeyed biscuits his handler trained him with.

Despite these efforts, it was almost noon before the first party of townsfolk summoned up the courage to leave their walls and venture into the strange new world of the Strigany camp.

There were maybe twenty of these brave souls, and when they came, they came huddled together as if in fear of some sudden ambush. Domnu Brock watched them from the shadowed stoop of his caravan, a wry smile creasing his scarred face. It was always the same: first a scouting party of the boldest or most curious, then the pause as they returned with their stories, and then the avalanche of the rest of the town.

It pleased him that business required these first few visitors to be rewarded. Brock was a man who valued courage, and it was fitting that these peasants’ relative bravery was met with generosity.

He watched approvingly as a couple of the caravan’s youths greeted the Lerensteiners. At first, the townsfolk remained stony-faced, but soon a few of them were smiling at the Striganies’ practiced patter. Then, slowly as melting ice, the group began to break up, as

the individual members caught sight of baled cloth, or the shine of jewellery, or the black silk of the fortune teller's tent.

Some of them gathered around Mihai, too. He was standing in the boxing ring, stripped to the waist, with his arms outstretched. Usually, he would have been clowning around in the ring with either the twins or with Ursus, providing some entertainment until the locals' machismo got the better of their common sense.

Judging by the Lerensteiners' response to the sight of his punishment, Brock decided as he sidled closer, Mihai and the twins had been wasting his effort. The sight of Mihai's discomfort seemed to be entertainment enough for the good people of Lerenstein.

"Why are you standing like that?" one asked. He had the pink face and beer barrel belly of a successful brewer, and Brock knew that he would be worried about the competition. He marked the man for special treatment later—one of the girls, perhaps, or a prize.

"It's a punishment, menheer," Mihai replied to the fat man. "I have to stand like this for three hours every morning for a fortnight."

The brewer regarded him sceptically.

"For three hours?" he repeated. "That isn't possible. I doubt if even I could do it."

Brock took a look at the brewer, who had all the athleticism and poise of an overstuffed sausage skin, and decided that the old braggart must have already been at his own wares. Mihai barely hesitated before replying, though.

"Perhaps not, menheer," Mihai said, looking at the brewer, "but then, I can see you carry a lot of muscle. There's not much more to me than skin and bone, as my aunties say."

"Why's he standing like that?" another Lerensteiner asked, as she came to stand beside the brewer. She was as well-padded as him, and the tone of her voice marked her as his wife, just as surely as the gold ring on her podgy finger.

"He says it's a punishment, my love," the brewer replied, his tone lowering and becoming conciliatory.

"A punishment, hey? Doesn't surprise me." She took a quick look around and then lowered her voice. "These Strigany are always up to something. What was it?"

"What was what, my love?"

"His crime, you silly old fool."

The brewer spluttered. Mihai, despite the growing pain in his arms, came to the man's rescue.

"Wasn't exactly a crime, ma'am," he told her. "It's just that I lost my master's money."

"Stole it, more like," another upstanding citizen added, and then looked around nervously.

“Thought so,” the brewer’s wife said, swelling with vindication. “Maybe we should throw something at him.”

The proposal brought a happy murmur of agreement from the half dozen spectators, and a couple of them looked around for likely missiles.

“Oh it was nothing like that,” Mihai hastened to assure them, and his left arm visibly trembled for the first time. “It was just that I lost too much money to the local lads at the last town. I’m the exhibition boxer, see, trained to it, but in that last town, well, what could I do? The further to the north we go, the stronger they seem to get.”

“That’s true,” the brewer told everybody within earshot. “It’s the climate and the ale. Makes us strong.”

He slapped the immensity of his stomach in illustration, and some of the hardness left his wife’s face as she regarded her man with something approaching pride.

“You’re probably right,” Mihai said, “but it’s like I told my master. That last town was just a fluke, an oddity. There’s no way any of the lads here will be able to match them. No offence, obviously.”

The brewer, his sense of civic pride obviously as wide as his girth, bridled.

“I can assure you, young man, that our lads are the equal to any in the Reikswald, or any in the Empire, for that matter. We are, after all, Lerensteiners.”

There was a chorus of agreement, and Brock, still hidden within the traces of a wagon, smiled. He would never understand how his son could possess both the wit to turn his punishment into a sales pitch, and the stupidity to have warranted it in the first place.

Truth be told, he could never understand Mihai at all.

“Hold on a minute,” another man said. He was as well upholstered as the brewer, although, whatever his business, it obviously didn’t involve such an immersion in his wares. He had the air of a man who was both sharp-eyed and stone-cold sober, and who didn’t care who knew it. “If this lad is supposed to be the prize fighter, why would he be punished like that? It won’t do his chances much good if he goes into the ring with tired arms.”

“That’s exactly what I said, menheer,” Mihai agreed vehemently “I told my master, just like you said. How am I going to keep my guard up properly if my arms won’t stop shaking? He wouldn’t have it, though. He’s got this idea that Lerensteiners are a pushover anyway, something somebody told him in the last place.”

A dozen or so spectators had gathered. They looked angry at this slight, and Brock wondered if Mihai might have overdone it.

“Lerensteiners are a pushover, are they?” This was the stone-cold sober one again, and Brock realised that he had made a mistake. The

man obviously wasn't too sharp to have been taken in along with the rest of them. "If that's the case, I suppose you'll be giving odds when the fights start?"

"Probably," Mihai said. "We usually do."

The questioner and the brewer turned to look at each other, and what Brock assumed was a rare moment of agreement passed between them.

"Well, then," the brewer said, "we'll be seeing you later."

Mihai made sure that his arms trembled as they walked off. He hid the smirk on his face by looking away from the townsfolk, which was when he caught sight of his father lurking behind the traces of one of the wagons.

Brock turned away before Mihai could see the grudging pride on his face. This was supposed to be a punishment for his stupidity the night before.

Miserable wretch, Mihai thought, and looked angrily back out over the crowd. As the day wore on, Brock continued to prowl around amongst the shadows of his caravan. He watched the faces of the customers as they bargained, and their subsequent delight at the price they bought their wares at. He was glad to see it.

By the time the goat had started to roast on the spit another group of townspeople had come down, and then another, and as the afternoon shadows lengthened into early evening, the Striganies' camp site was thronged, filled to bursting as it digested the people of Lerenstein and their hard-earned gold.

Brock, who had spent the day lurking, decided that it was dark enough for him to take a stroll through the main circle, without his battered appearance scaring anybody off, but, before he had so much as stepped away from his wagon, a bony hand reached out and gripped his elbow.

"Petru Engel," Brock said, recognising the black-clad old man despite the darkness. "What's up? Pickpockets, is it?"

The petru barked with what Brock assumed was laughter.

"Worse than that," he said. "We've just had a visitor."

"I can see at least two hundred."

"No," the petru said, a rare impatience sharpening his voice. He looked around and leaned closer, "I mean, a black-clad visitor, slightly built."

"Oh no."

"Yes."

Brock sighed, and looked up at the first of the stars overhead. He glowered at them as though this unwelcome visitation was somehow their fault.

"Well? What news?"

“You’d better come and hear it for yourself,” the old man said, and, without waiting to see if his domnu would follow him, he turned and hastened away to his wagon.

Brock followed him, slipping away from the main fair and into the encampment. The voices and instruments of the entertainers, and the chatter and laughter of the crowd became muted as he and the petru slipped into the old man’s wagon.

It was pitch dark inside, so Engel sparked a match to light the lantern. It flared into life with a fart of sulphur, and, in the blossoming light, Brock could see the eyes of the petru’s visitor glittering like onyx beads.

It was one of the biggest ravens he had ever seen. It stood proprietorially on the back of the only chair in the wagon, its horny old claws gripping the wood as it regarded the domnu. It was as big as a hawk and, although it lacked a hawk’s talons, the great hook of its beak was as sharp as any raptor’s.

Brock wondered how many bodies that beak had dissected over the years, how many eyeballs it had plucked. He found himself touching the empty socket from which his own eye had been plucked on a battlefield. Then he put the thought from his head. It had been a man who had done this, not a raven, and anyway, it never paid to show the petru’s familiars anything other than respect.

“Close the door,” the old man told him, as the glow of the lantern lit the interior of the wagon. Brock did so, locking out the muffled sounds of the fair beyond. Then he turned back to face the raven. Its eyes were as sharp as a wife’s tongue as it watched him, and the domnu nodded politely towards it as he sat on his haunches. It didn’t nod back.

“So, what news do you bring, most noble of bandits?” he asked. The raven cocked its head to one side at the question, almost as if it understood. Its eyes remained fixed on Brock’s, even when the petru unfurled the message that had been tied to the leather cylinder the raven still wore around its leg. The raven turned its attention to the old man and cawed, the sound impossibly loud within the confines of the wagon.

“He is hungry after his flight,” the petru explained as he ran one finger soothingly down the raven’s black mantle, “I have promised him fresh meat. As to the message, it is clear enough. It seems that the peasants’ great lords have decided to banish us from these lands. They will send us to a place by the Black Mountains.”

Brock looked at him, his face carefully expressionless. “Banish us to where?” he asked.

“We don’t know, somewhere in the mountains, maybe.”

Brock scowled, and shifted uneasily.

"The mountains," he mused, "at this time of year? That would almost be as bad as another persecution."

"No," Petru Engel said, "it wouldn't."

The domnu looked up, confused by the tone of the old man's voice. Then he remembered.

"Of course, you remember the last one don't you? I'm sorry."

The petru shrugged.

"It was a long time ago," he said, although by the bitterness in his voice, Brock thought, it could have been yesterday. He sighed, and looked back at the raven. If ever there were creatures of ill omen, they were these black-clad scavengers.

"We owe the honourable creature a debt for bringing the message," Brock said carefully, "but I wonder how we know it is true? Many a rumour comes to nothing, many a promise, too."

"Oh, we know it's true," the petru said miserably. "I've known this one since he was a chick, and I've known his master for nigh on half a century. If Petru Viorel says we should prepare, then I believe him."

Brock frowned.

"Prepare how?" he asked, frowning as he thought aloud. "Even if we are exiled, who will enforce the decree? Should we obey it? Maybe the danger of defying our noble lords is less than the danger of risking the mountains in winter. Think, petru, even if the weather didn't kill us, how will we survive? Not even Strigany can live on stone."

"That," said the petru, "is what we have to decide. Now, if you will excuse me, I will go and find my friend here some flesh. He has many more caravans to find before his task is done, and he'll need his strength. After that we can talk."

"Yes," Brock said, already deep in thought, as the old man offered his bony old shoulder to the crow and carried it, hunchbacked, out into the darkness. "When we know what to do, we'll call the council." "Brothers and sisters," Domnu Brock said, his tone rich with the formality of the occasion, "we are gathered here on the night of Geheimnisnacht Eve to discuss a matter that has arisen. It is a matter that is of great importance to us all."

He paused and peered around the circle of wagon masters. They sat gathered around the embers of the watch fire, their eyes dark with unease. Even those who had been nodding with the exhaustion of another day's trading roused themselves, woken by the gathering sense of anxiety as much as by their domnu's words.

"Two days ago, our petru received a message from another caravan," he continued, "the caravan of Domnu Viorel. Some of you know him."

"I know the man's got the luck of an elf when it comes to dice,"

somebody said, and there was a ripple of laughter.

"I've had the misfortune to play dice with him too," Brock answered with an easy grin, "but whether or not Viorel's luck is all that it appears, he is a man to be trusted. He is one of us. His blood is our blood. Dice is one thing. Our survival, and the survival of our people, is another."

The council's good humour withered like a green shoot beneath a late frost. Brock was pleased. It wasn't going to be easy to talk his people into the decision that he and the petru had already taken.

"Yes, our survival," he continued, and, letting the thought hang in the air, he gazed into the red glow of the embers. "It would appear that the nobles of these lands have issued a decree, a warrant. It says that all of our people are to leave these lands and go south, to a place called Flintmar. It's a patch of heath that lies between the Moot and the Black Mountains."

The silence that followed this statement was broken only by the crackling of the settling fire.

"The Black Mountains," Mihai repeated, "sounds lovely."

There was some nervous laughter. It died as Brock scowled at his son.

"So, where exactly is this Flintmar place?" somebody asked, and it took the domnu a moment to recognise old Esku.

"It is near where the Upper Reik leaves the Black Mountains," he told him, "south of the Black Fire Pass."

"How near to the Black Mountains?" Mihai asked.

His father felt a flash of irritation at his son's interrogation. Then he bit back on the feeling. Mihai was, after all, old enough to sit at council, just. He was the part owner of his own wagon too, along with the twins, who sat on either side of him.

"A couple of days' march, we think," he said, shrugging. "It's nearer than I'd like, but there it is."

"A couple of days' march," Mihai scoffed, "for us, perhaps. Not for the things that infest that cursed place, though. Orcs roll along at a faster clip than we ever could, and they're not even the worst of it."

"No need to scowl like that, domnu. He's right," Deaf Tsara shouted from behind the flared tube of her ear trumpet. "We'd be better off taking our chances here. Outlaws or not, it's never made any difference to those who want to rob us, or do business with us."

"We'll stand on our own feet, as always," Mihai said, and there was a ripple of agreement from the assembled wagon masters. Brock bit back the reply that sprang to mind. Things had been so much easier in the mercenary company he had served in. There, he gave an order and it was followed.

He took a deep breath, reminded himself that Strigany were no

more soldiers than goats were sheep, and answered.

"First of all, you don't have to tell me what we've always been, Mihai," he told his son, his single eye bright with anger. "I know that better than you, as does every one of your elders around this fire."

The two men glared at each other. Then Brock continued.

"Not that I don't know how you feel," he conceded, remembering the need to sound reasonable in front of the other wagon masters. "That is why those who would destroy us have worded their decree as they have. They know of our pride, of our strength, of our endurance. They're counting on it, because they want us to stay."

"I thought you said they wanted us to leave?" Mihai asked.

"What they want," the domnu told him, "is us, dead. One of the peasants who signed this proclamation is the Elector Count of Averland. He has always been our enemy, and with this decree the entire Empire will join him in his persecution."

"I don't know about that," Esku offered. "There are a few like the lunatic Averland in every town. So what? We move on and leave them to be devoured by their own hatred. There aren't that many of them. Most of the peasantry are happy enough to see us."

"After this decree is pasted onto every billboard in the state, they'll be even happier," Brock said, grimly. "With the law telling them that it's not only their right, but also their duty to rob us? The entire land will become our enemy. Is becoming our enemy, I should say There are already stories from Altdorf of what is happening."

"But the Black Mountains," another wagon master said. "It isn't just the danger that lurks within them, and we all know that's real enough, but how will we make a living?"

"It will be hard," the domnu told him directly, "damned hard, but overcoming hardship is what we are born for. I don't need to tell you that. It's written into the charm carved into every main beam of every wagon, and taught to every child we are blessed with. We will endure."

"Endure on what?" Mihai said. "Fine words? Fresh air?"

"Watch your tongue," Brock snarled. Then, seeing the same question in a dozen other faces, he realised that he'd better answer it.

"We will survive as we have always done," the domnu told him, "by trade. We make better brandy than any of the peasants. We weave better cloth, and make better jewellery. The Upper Reik is near, and it flows down into the Empire. It can carry our goods down as easily as riders can carry gold back up."

"Who will do the carrying for us?" Deaf Tsara bellowed.

"We'll have to hire some of the peasants, some we can trust." Even as the domnu said it he realised how ridiculous the idea sounded.

"There are none such," Esku said, and there was a murmur of agreement.

"We'll see," the domnu stalled, "and anyway, merchants will surely come to us."

"They'll come to us, yes," Mihai said bitterly, and despite his irritation Brock couldn't help feeling a flash of pride as he saw how many of the wagon masters were listening to his son. If only the lad wouldn't argue all the time. "They'll gather like crows above a slaughterhouse, and squeeze every ounce of profit from our work. I'd rather starve."

"That's your choice," Brock told him. "You can starve, the rest of us will live until we can get the banishment lifted."

"Do you think we will be able to?" Deaf Tsara shouted. "And how long will that take?"

"I don't know," the domnu shrugged, "a few months, a few years. We have the gold, and it's a rare elector whose principles can survive the right price."

"In other words, we could be there forever," Mihai added, ignoring his father and looking around the circle, "rotting like animals left to die in a trap, and prey for the peasant's merchants and the beasts of the Black Mountains. No. No, I say we take our chances."

Brock was surprised at the rumble of agreement, and fought down the impulse to go and box his son's ears.

"After all," one of the domnu's friends said, in conciliation, "if life does become too tough, we can always go to Flintmar later."

"By then, it may be too late," Brock insisted.

"Our lives were never meant to be certain," another man added.

"Well, they'll be certain enough if we stay here," Brock said. He turned to the petru for help, but the old man remained silent, merely staring into the fire and drawing on his pipe.

"Look," Esku said, "at least let's wait until after the festival. We are doing good business here, and the next town along is even richer. We can always talk again next month. We all respect you, domnu, and if you say we should go then we should all respect that, but if we do go, we should make the most of the time we have remaining first."

"The problem is, we don't know how much time that will be. It could be a week, a month. It could be--"

Before he could finish the statement, there was a cry from the sentries, followed by the beating hooves of a horse galloping into the stockade. The wagon masters sprang to their feet, and the night came alive with the hiss of their drawn weapons and the glitter of firelight on steel.

The sentries threw oil onto their braziers, and the bloom of yellow light sent long, black shadows racing among the neat lines of

the Strigianies' wagons and tents.

Brock led the phalanx of wagon masters to the central clearing where the intruder's horse had staggered to a halt. If this was an attack, the domnu realised as his men surrounded the rider, it wasn't much of one. There was only a single horseman, and he was neither armed nor armoured for war, unless it was a ruse.

"Sentries," Brock roared, "eyes back out front. This could be a distraction."

The men jumped to follow his orders, and were soon joined by others, who, scantily clad but well armed, had come stumbling out of their caravans at the alarm.

"To the stockade," Brock told them, his voice booming amongst the wagons. "Take your positions."

Only when the camp was awake and bristling did the domnu turn his attention back to the rider, who stood at bay amongst the circle of wagon masters' blades.

"Chervez," Brock shouted into the night even as he regarded the intruder, "any sign of an attack?"

"Not yet, domnu," a voice answered back from the darkness.

"Keep alert. And you," Brock said, lowering his voice as he spoke to the horseman, "what do you mean by barging in like this? Why didn't you stop at the gate?"

By way of an answer, the man ran a hand through his thick black mane of hair, slipped from his horse's back and bowed. His movements were clumsy with exhaustion.

"My pardon, domnu," he said, his words a little slurred. "I have been riding for three days to find you. I am Dannie, from the caravan of Domnu Ionescu. I need to speak to Petru Engel, who I think travels amongst you."

"Do you now?" Brock asked, exchanging a glance with the petru, who stood behind the swordsmen, "and what does Domnu Ionescu want of Petru Engel?"

"Nothing," Dannie told him. "He's dead. They're all dead. It was state troopers. I wasn't there, but I followed them. I..."

Dannie paused, put his hand to his face, and staggered back against the heaving flanks of his mare.

The domnu was immediately contrite, but it was the petru who pushed forward and took Dannie by the arm.

"I am Engel," he said. "Here, take my shoulder. You have found me. Come, rest and drink something. You are safe now."

"Thank you, petru," Dannie muttered, "but I must see to my horse."

"We'll do that," Brock said, "and we'll be glad to. You are welcome among us."

There was a chorus of agreement, and the wagon masters watched the petru lead the newcomer away with a mixture of fear and sympathy.

"We'll resume the council tomorrow," Brock told them, "after we've heard what he has to say."

Although he felt sorry for the boy, the domnu found himself thanking the gods for sending him the stick he needed to drive his caravan to safety. Dannie let the petru lead him back to the solid block of his wagon, and sit him down on the smooth wood of its floor. He watched while the old man lit a lamp and, by the glow of it, uncorked a stone bottle to pour him a wooden bowl of some tonic.

"Here," the petru said, handing the bowl to him, "drink it slowly."

Dannie swirled the viscous liquid, inhaling the aroma. He had never smelled anything like this before, except perhaps the sweet warmth of a meadow in high summer. Although there was no taste of alcohol when he drank, it soothed him as well as the strongest potcheen.

After the first swallow, the knots that three days of riding had tied in his muscles started unravelling. After the second swallow, he sighed with relief, and when he'd drained the bowl, even the rat's nest of worries that beset him seemed less pressing.

"This is good, petru," he said, feeling the warmth of the brew as it seeped into his blood.

"Made from rowan berries and a few other bits and pieces," the petru told him. He refilled his guest's bowl, and then corked the bottle, sat in his chair, and started filling a pipe.

"Thank you," Dannie said, and drank some more. His breathing came heavier, and his eyelids started to drop. He blinked hard, and sat back up straight.

"I should tell you what happened," he said, but the petru just shrugged.

"You should, but it may be well to sleep first. I can see how exhausted you are."

"Yes, you're right," Dannie said, before performing a jaw-cracking yawn, "but maybe you need to know this now. My petru, Petru Nils, had taken me for an apprentice. He told me many of the tales, much of the lore. I was to be our next petru."

Dannie took another swig, and, despite the numbing exhaustion, he could feel his host's eyes upon him.

"Well, now that he is dead, I am petru. I am domnu, petru, everything, and, as such, I will bring my people their revenge."

Dannie turned to face the petru, who frowned. It had been a long time since he had seen such cold hatred in somebody's eyes, maybe not since he'd been as young as his guest.

“Eat revenge too hot and it scalds the tongue,” he said.

“I know the aphorisms,” Dannie said. He nodded, and looked into the depths of his bowl, “And I know about the Old Fathers too.”

He let the words hang in the air. Engel stopped drawing on his pipe. The air seemed to grow colder, thicker. He paced over to the door of his wagon, peeked outside to make sure that nobody was out there, and bolted it before returning to his seat.

“The Old Fathers?” he asked.

“I have come here,” Dannie continued, “so that you may guide me to one.”

Petru Engel opened his mouth to ask Dannie what he was talking about, what an Old Father was supposed to be. Tales were only tales. Was he in shock? Then he closed his mouth without uttering a word.

There was no point in telling a lie unless it would be believed. He would have to try another tack.

“The Old Fathers,” he said, grimacing as he spoke, as though the very words had a foul taste. “I don’t know what your petru told you, or started to tell you, but they are not... they are not tame.”

“I know that,” Dannie said, his voice flat and dull. “How could they be?”

“I mean,” the petru continued, “they are not sane either, none of them. They are unclean, taboo.”

“So can women be,” Dannie answered, “but that doesn’t stop you from talking to them.”

“That’s totally different,” the petru said uneasily.

“Anyway, that is why I am here,” Dannie said. He put the cup down. “I ask you, in the name of my caravan, of my family and our blood, to aid me. Now, if I have your leave, petru, I will sleep. It’s been many days.”

“Of course,” the petru said, “I’ll give you some blankets.”

Dannie, however, was already snoring, exhaustion taking him where he sat. The petru watched him, his beard moving as he chewed his lip. Then, with a sigh, he leaned forwards, and put his face in his hands.

“The Old Fathers,” he said to himself. “By Ushoian, lad, whatever your petru told you, they are nothing but a curse on our people.”

Then he uncorked the stone bottle and poured himself a measure. He drank deeply, and sighed miserably.

He had no idea that Mihai was lying not three feet beneath him, his head resting on the rear axle and his ear pressed to the floor boards. If he had, the emotions that raged within his bony old chest would have found the perfect release.

As it was, he sat up until dawn, chewing his beard into rats’ tails, and wondering what to do with the young man who lay slumbering on

the hard wooden floor of his wagon, and who threatened to damn them all.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“The price of life is death.”

– Strigany aphorism Dannie was alone. The land around him was flat and empty. Not even the most gnarled patch of scrubland broke the endless plain of grey stone. He looked up to find ash falling from the dark sky. It drifted between his feet, and dusted the bodies that lay ready in their coffins around him.

The only sound was a knocking, loud and rhythmic, and, when he turned to the noise, he saw that the source was a black-robed figure. It was stooped beneath its robe, bent over one of the coffins as it hammered the lid closed. As Dannie watched, it finished its work, and started on another.

“Who are you?” he asked.

The figure, still wielding the hammer, didn’t deign to turn. Instead, it pointed with one gnarled finger. Dannie followed the yellow claw, and saw one coffin was empty.

He didn’t need to ask for whom it had been made.

“You awake in there?” a voice asked, and with a terrifying rush of vertigo, Dannie’s dream shattered. He sat bolt upright on the wooden floor, and, in the darkness of the wagon, he struggled to remember where he was.

“Better wake up and get this before it’s gone,” the voice told him, and Dannie realised that, although he had woken, the hammering sound continued. It was somebody knocking on the door of the wagon.

“I’m awake,” he croaked, and then coughed to clear his throat. “Come in.”

“Thanks,” the voice said, and the wagon door opened. Dannie squinted in the wash of sunlight, and saw his guest. The man was perhaps twenty, he guessed. Although he was as thin-faced and wiry as any Strigany, his blue eyes and mop of red hair were unusual for one of their people. Dannie vaguely recognised him from the night before.

“Brought you some food,” the man said, nodding absentmindedly towards the scroll box above the door, and climbing into the wagon.

“Thank you,” Dannie said, and, at the same time he realised how stiff his muscles were, he found that he had an appetite. “Thank you very much. I haven’t eaten for days.”

“Better take it easy then,” the redhead told him, and handed him a wooden platter of food. Dannie’s mouth watered at the sight of it: there was a pot of ale, fresh bread, sweet wrinkled apples, and even a slab of jellied pork.

"Will you join me?" he asked, breaking the bread and smearing a slice of jellied pork onto it.

"No, I've eaten. I'll keep you company, though. My names Mihai."

"And I'm Dannie," Dannie said, and offered his hand.

"Yes, I know," Mihai said as they shook. "I remember you all right."

"I didn't know we'd met before," Dannie said around a mouthful of food. "By the gods, this hits the spot. This pork's fantastic."

"Yes, we met years ago. I was only about ten, and you would have been twelve or thirteen. It was when our two caravans joined up to travel through some bandit country."

"Oh yes, I remember that," Dannie said, nodding, and taking a bite of one of the apples. It was as sweet as honey, and he washed it down with a swig of ale. "Didn't we go hunting together or something?"

"No, but you saved my life," Mihai told him. "I was swimming in a river when the current took me. If you hadn't galloped down the bank to fish me out, my bones would have ended up in the sea."

Dannie's eyes opened in surprise.

"That was you?" he asked, and tore off another piece of bread. "Yes, I do remember now. With that red hair of yours, how could I forget? How you wailed!"

"Well, I was only ten," Mihai said.

"Yes, of course," Dannie agreed easily. "You were strong enough to save yourself, though. You'd have made it to the bank eventually. I just wanted to give you a hand."

"Thank you," Mihai said. Dannie was about to brush the thanks away, but, when he saw the seriousness on Mihai's face, he changed his mind. If the man wanted to owe him a debt, well, that might come in handy.

"You are welcome," he said. "Strigany are all one family. We have to stick together."

"That we do," Mihai said. "Hey, after that you can come and see me wrestle a bear if you like."

"Really?"

"Sort of. I've known old Ursus since he was a cub, but we like to put on a good show for the peasants. He can snarl and lumber about something terrible," Mihai grinned.

Dannie grinned back, his full cheeks making him look like a hamster. Then he remembered his duty, and the grin died.

"Thanks," he said, "but I need to talk to the petru. We have some business to attend to. Can you tell him I want to speak to him?"

"Of course," Mihai said, nodding, and regarding the other man with a strange appraisal. "I'll send him right along. And don't forget,"

he said, slapping Dannie on the shoulder as he got up to leave, "I owe you one." That afternoon there had been some more argument, but not much. To Petru Engel's dismay, Dannie's claim to have been his petru's apprentice had proved to be no idle boast. His knowledge of lore and the custom was too thorough to be dismissed, and, when Engel had tried to dampen his thirst for vengeance with a charm, the younger man had waved it away.

Eventually, Petru Engel had given in. The ferocity of his ambition was too strong to be denied, and he had the right. That was the real problem. For all the good it would do him, he had the right.

So it was that, after the cooking fires had burned out, and as the wheel of the stars turned overhead, the petru and his guest stepped out into the night. Both men were cloaked, and although they had a long march ahead of them, they avoided the corral to slip out of the encampment on foot.

The guards on the gate both turned away as they approached, although neither of them could have said quite why, and the guard dogs that ran up to challenge them suddenly changed their minds and, tails between their legs, slunk off into the shadows.

"My master never taught me how to do that," Dannie murmured when they were far enough away from the guards.

"We all have our talents," the petru murmured back. The walls of Lerenstein were to their right, but the two men had no business there tonight. Instead, they skirted the town, and angled off over the moonlit fields towards the forest beyond.

Beneath the light of Mannslieb, the forest looked solid and black. As they drew nearer, the ancient trees towered over them, and Dannie felt a twinge of unease. He scolded himself. Compared to what they would be facing tonight, there was little in this darkness to fear.

In fact, Dannie thought, compared to the thing that they would be facing tonight, there was little in this world to fear.

"How many miles will we walk tonight?" he asked the petru, mainly to take his mind off of that thought.

"I'm not sure," the old man said, "but we will be finished before dawn. Perhaps," he added, "long before dawn, and forever. It is still not too late to turn back. There are other ways than this. There always are."

"No," Dannie said, making the decision quickly, before his fear had the chance to betray him. "I am committed. This is my path."

"Yes," the petru sighed as they found the track that cut into the tree line. "I was afraid that you'd say that."

The two men lapsed into silence as they left the moonlit fields for the blinding darkness of the forest. The track that they followed was riven with deep ruts, and the two men stumbled along it, their way lit

only by the blade of moonlight that fell through the gap in the forest canopy.

Now and then, animal cries would float out of the darkness. Some Dannie recognised, others he did not. Once there was a sudden, terrifying shriek of pain from their right, followed by a moment of complete silence. Above them, the silhouettes of owls hunted those of bats who, in turn, hunted moths.

Dannie immersed himself in the sounds of the sleeping forest; anything rather than think about where they were heading. Even so, when the petru suddenly froze, he had no idea why.

Knowing better than to ask, he just froze behind him. His eyes scanned the darkness in vain, and, although he stilled his own breathing in order to hear better, there was nothing but the call of some distant thing that might have been a bird.

Then, from not twelve paces ahead of them, there came the voice.

“Good evening, petru,” it said. “Dannie, I was hoping to find you here.”

“Mihai.” Both men said the name at the same time, and, as Mihai stepped forward, his grin was bright enough to be seen, even in the darkness.

“And Boris.” This voice came from the darkness on their right.

“And Bran,” another added, and the twins emerged like wraiths from the undergrowth.

The petru hissed with exasperation.

“What are you doing here, you young fools?” he snapped at Mihai, who took a step back.

“We came to look after you, petru,” he said. “I know that we weren’t invited, but you’re too valuable to be left unguarded.”

“The day that I need guarding by the likes of you is the day I’ll happily die,” the petru said.

“I can see why,” Boris agreed.

“But think,” his brother added, “how bad we’d feel if you didn’t come back.”

“You’ve always been like a grandfather to all of us,” Mihai agreed, “and the gods know what may lurk in these woods. Or what you will find at your journey’s end.”

“So,” the petru hissed, “eavesdropping.”

Mihai shuffled his feet, and, for once, even the twins seemed lost for words.

“Meddling,” the petru continued, “in the affairs of your elders.”

In the darkness, Mihai’s silhouette shrugged.

“We are yours to command, petru,” he said, “although you should know that Dannie here saved my life. I can hardly let him walk into such darkness alone.”

“Such darkness,” the petru mused. “Do you know who it is we seek tonight? Speak plainly, now.”

“I heard some talk whilst I was passing,” Mihai said, “something about an Old Father. I don’t know who this brigand is, but he sounds like a dangerous one, maybe too dangerous to meet alone.”

The petru watched Mihai. Then he started to make a soft, wheezing sound that turned out to be laughter.

“He is even more dangerous than that,” Engel said, “although, young Mihai, I don’t see why your enterprise shouldn’t be rewarded, and your eavesdropping too. You can accompany us, but be warned, you don’t speak, move or breathe unless I tell you to. If you do, and if you survive, I will hurt you afterwards... badly.”

“Yes, petru,” Mihai said, and the twins chorused their agreement.

“Very well then. Let’s get moving.”

The petru led off, and Mihai fell into step besides Dannie, with the twins behind.

“You shouldn’t have come,” Dannie told him, but Mihai just slapped him on the shoulder.

“I told you,” he said, “I owe you one. Anyway, you’re one of us now.”

Dannie wondered at the relief that he felt at those words. It was as though he had dropped a burden that he hadn’t even known he was carrying. He had always been a loner. He had hunted alone ever since he was a boy. His studies with the petru had kept him apart from the others in his caravan too, not that he had minded, but, no matter how alone he had been, he had always known that his caravan had belonged to him as he belonged to it.

He felt the loss again, a whole new type of pain this time, and his resolve stiffened. His face was grim as the forest swallowed them up, and soon there was nothing left of their passage, but for their boot prints and the stooped, snuffling things that were following them. The rock towered over the surrounding forest. It was bright in the moonlight, the stone almost luminous against the black of the sky. Dannie had been able to snatch glimpses of it through gaps in the canopy for the past two hours, but it was only now that his party had reached the withered and barren clearing that surrounded the outcrop, that he could appreciate its true immensity. It towered up into the night as if hungering for the stars that glittered above.

However, it was not up that Dannie was looking, it was down.

“That’s it,” the petru whispered into his ear, gesturing towards the mouth of the tunnel. Against the pale rock, the entrance was as black as a cavity in a tooth, although the rotten smell that issued from it spoke of an even deeper corruption.

“Did the Old Father dig it himself?” Dannie asked, knowing that

there was nothing to be gained by stalling, but stalling anyway.

"No," the petru answered as he opened his satchel. "It looks natural, and it's near enough to the trading routes and villages to be... to be well stocked."

"Oh," Dannie said, and his nose wrinkled as the stink grew worse. For a sudden, treacherous moment, he wished that he'd never embarked upon this path. Then he remembered the people of his caravan, and the charred bones of their remains, and the ash, always that ash.

"I'll take that," he said, taking the lantern that the petru had just lit. The yellow light flickered in the breeze. It was barely bright enough to be seen in the moonlight, still less to ward off what lay coiled and stinking in the darkness below.

"Thank you for your help, but from here on I walk alone."

"No," Mihai said, "we will come with you."

"We might as well," Bran agreed.

"After coming all this way," his brother added.

"No, he must go alone," the petru said regretfully. "It is best. Here, I have some things for you." The petru turned to Dannie, and started rummaging about in the depths of his satchel.

First, he handed Dannie a small wooden box. It took him a moment to recognise it as the scroll box that hung over the lintel of every Strigany wagon.

"Will it help?" he asked.

The petru shrugged. "Who knows, but it can't hurt. This will help, though."

He gave him a chalice, and the metal glinted yellow, despite the chill of the moonlight. The Striganies' eyes glinted along with it.

"The Old Fathers like respect," the petru said as Dannie took the chalice, "and also neatness."

With that, he handed Dannie the last of the three items. It was a bone-handled straight razor. Dannie pursed his lips as he took it.

"But listen," the petru said as he flicked it open and tested the blade against the hem of his tunic, "we can still go back to the caravan. It's not as though you are the first Strigany to have suffered loss. We can leave this cursed place now, if you choose. It isn't too late."

"Yes," Dannie said, "it is."

The five of them stood for a moment, still and unmoving in the moonlight. There didn't seem anything left to say. They just stood and watched the cave entrance with the terrible fascination of mice watching a cobra.

"Let's go," Dannie told himself, and, with a deep swallow, he marched into the eye watering stink of the Old Father's keep. He took

one last glance at his waiting companions as he reached the entrance. Then, he turned and descended into the darkness. For some reason, he had always expected some sign of the old culture in one of the Old Father's keeps-carvings or tapestries, perhaps, or at the very least some simple architecture of doors or arches, or paving slabs.

In fact, there was none of that here. Only the stench that greased the air provided any clue that this dank underworld was inhabited: that and the filth that had been smeared onto the living rock of the passageway. It wasn't a dwelling, Dannie realised as he forced himself to carry on putting one foot in front of another, it was a lair.

A sudden draft sent the flame in his lamp flickering, and he paused, frantically twisting the wheel on the oil jar to make the flame burn brighter. Then he stopped. Down here, and all alone, he realised, it didn't matter how high the flame was. It would never be bright enough.

A sudden impulse to turn and flee seized him. He ignored it, just as he ignored the beating of his heart, and the sweat on his palms, and the nausea that lay coiled within his stomach.

Instead, he thought about his duty, and carried on.

It wasn't until he stopped at the first junction that he realised that he was not alone. When he paused, the sound of neatly regimented footsteps, which had been keeping pace with his own, carried on for a moment too long, and then suddenly stopped. There had been a strange quality about these footsteps, too, Dannie thought: sort of a clipping that sounded like claws against stone.

He took a deep, shuddering breath, and reminded himself that he was a Strigany, a domnu and a petru, and a loyal subject of the Old Fathers.

Then something touched him on the shoulder. He hissed with terror as he spun around, automatically flipping open the straight razor that he had been carrying.

"It's all right," Mihai whispered, "it's only me."

Dannie almost laughed with relief, and gripped the other man's shoulder in greeting. He had never been so happy to see another human being.

"I thought the petru said you had to wait for me outside."

"No, he changed his mind," Mihai lied. "Said you might want the company."

Dannie shrugged. If Petru Engel said that it was all right, then, by all the gods, it was all right.

"Come on then," he whispered, "but remember, however foul the Old Father looks, he is owed our respect. They all are."

Mihai nodded, and looked up at a dark smear of something that had been dragged across the ceiling.

"These Old Fathers," he said, "they aren't just bandits at all, are they?"

Dannie smiled grimly.

"Just remember," he said, "respect."

"Yes, of course," Mihai whispered back. Then he glanced over Dannie's shoulder, and said, "Oh gods."

Even in the lamplight, Dannie could see the blood draining from his friend's face, and knew that they had found what he had sought.

Or rather, it had found him.

He turned to see the Old Father's entourage spilling from the passageway ahead, boiling out of the darkness like maggots from a wound. Their smooth skin gleamed as pale as bone beneath the patina of filth that covered them, and their eyes, set within impossibly deep sockets, were as black as onyx.

"Oh gods," Mihai said again. Dannie ignored him. As the creatures scrabbled nearer, the putrid stink that filled this burrow grew stronger, and he realised that it was the smell of the creatures. They moved in such a huddled mass that there was no counting them, but there must have been dozens in the malnourished swarm.

Dannie knew that they had once been human. At least, that was what the lore said. If they had once been human, they scarcely looked it now. Even though they had retained the bodies of men, any trace of their humanity had long since been scoured away. He could see the lack of it in their dead eyes, their insectile scuttling, the way that they were naked apart from the dirt they were smeared with.

For one vertiginous moment of sheer terror, he thought that he would forget the words of the charm that would turn this chattering horde from predators to escort, but, then he was chanting, fear giving his voice volume, even as it unlocked his memory.

He had barely completed the first verse before the Old Father's entourage was upon him. Their sharp tongues darted out to taste the sweat on the back of the Strigany's hands, and, although some showed their splintered fangs, none used them. Instead, they listened to his voice, twitching and whining like beaten dogs as they pressed around the two humans, pawing at them, even as they grovelled down.

Dannie repeated the charm until the things that huddled around him were all bent in submission. Then he stopped and waited, half expecting the starving predators that surrounded him to attack. When they didn't, he spoke.

"Now, in the name of our lord," he told them, his voice echoing into the labyrinth beyond, "I charge you to lead us to him so that we may make obeisance."

The first of them, each vertebra of its spine visible beneath its anaemic skin, turned and led away. The others followed it, some of

them greedily pinching the humans as they squeezed passed. Dannie's face wrinkled with revulsion as he felt their tangled bodies pressing against him, but, even so, he allowed himself to be swept along with the tide of movement.

"Come on," he said, making sure that Mihai was behind him, "let them lead us."

"So they aren't just bandits," Mihai mumbled to himself as he let the stinking swarm press him forward.

Dannie, however, was too concerned about their guides to answer him. Even though the charm had worked, some of the Old Father's entourage were finding their hunger too much to bear. The appetite that the smell of fresh meat had kindled within their malnourished frames was hard to contain, and soon their whines of frustration at being denied had given way to a purposeful silence. They slavered as they slunk along, eyes flitting greedily amongst the packed mass of each other's bodies.

Dannie, sensing what this change of mood entailed, watched in horrified fascination. It wasn't long until, amongst the shadow play of lamplight through their slinking bodies, he saw that a victim had been selected. It was a limping thing, one leg a twisted mess of shattered bone and pink scar tissue, and, as soon as Dannie saw the space opening up around it, he knew that it was doomed.

The creature knew it too. As some of its fellows paused in their march to encircle it, it put its back to the wall, and bared its teeth.

Dannie, still being jostled forward by the rush of the creatures, caught one last glimpse of the victim as its fellows leapt upon it. It disappeared between their writhing bodies, and its squeal was cut off by the tearing of their teeth. Dannie could hear the sounds of snapping and slurping and tearing as it was devoured.

"Nice friends you and the petru keep," Mihai said, his voice carefully neutral.

"That we all keep," Dannie replied. "These things are the xholas from our stories, the ghouls."

Before he could say anything else, the walls on either side of him opened into a deep cavern, and his guides rushed away from him, skittering away from the lamplight and into the darkness.

Dannie stopped and looked down as something crunched beneath his boots. He found himself standing on a tangle of splintered bones. They were gnawed and brittle, and as deep as leaves that drifted in autumn. He supposed that they were animal bones.

No, he admitted to himself. No, he didn't suppose that they were animal bones. He hoped that they were.

"Watch your step," he whispered to Mihai, and started to edge his way forward. The Old Father's entourage had gone to ground amongst

the grisly remains of their nest, but he could still make out the blur of their waiting bodies, and the glitter of their watching eyes.

“Where now?” Mihai asked.

“Just follow me,” Dannie told him, his voice calm. “I think that we’re... we’re...”

He trailed off as, with another step, the lamp light revealed the Old Father. It sat above them, hunched forward on a throne of bones that had been lashed together with dark-stained rags.

Although it had the same translucent skin as its retainers, the only bones visible beneath the Old Father’s hide were those that sharpened its face into a confusion of misshapen angles. The rest of its twisted frame bulged with lumps of muscle. Even its claws showed an unnatural health. They gleamed like seasoned ivory as they twitched beneath the lamp light.

Dannie looked into the black marbles of its eyes, and every thought in his head froze. By the time he had dragged his eyes away, he found that he was kneeling down amongst the shattered bones of his lord’s feasting.

He glanced back to find Mihai standing transfixed.

“Kneel,” he whispered, and pulled at his trouser leg. As Mihai obliged, Dannie could hear the rattling dice of his teeth chattering.

He turned back to the Old Father. Not daring to meet the thing’s gaze, he looked at its chest, instead. It was as wide as his mare’s, although the ribcage beneath had obviously been shattered and badly reset over the centuries.

“Master,” he said, his voice barely a whisper, “my name is Dannie Ionescu. I am the domnu and petru of caravan Ionescu, and this is my companion Mihai, of the caravan of Brock.”

The Old Father said nothing, merely squirming upon its perch. For all the broken asymmetry of its hunch-backed bulk, the creature moved with the easy grace of a cobra. Dannie glanced down to find that its feet were clawed, too. The talons were as sharply hooked as an osprey’s, and he found himself wondering if the black stuff beneath them was blood.

Then he heard the voice. It was so soothing, so refined, that for a moment he couldn’t believe that it had come from the monstrosity that sat in its own filth before him.

Why are you here?

“I have come here to pay my respects to you, oh master. I have only recently become petru, and, although my training is incomplete, I know of our allegiance to you and your kind.”

He looked up, not quite daring to meet the Old Father’s eyes, but wanting to see the lips that had spoken so sweetly.

And why are you really here? the voice asked, and Dannie

realised that, although the Old Father's lips hadn't moved, he could hear his words with perfect, poisonous clarity.

"I am here for revenge," he said simply. "My caravan was murdered. I have come to call upon your magnificence, and to beg that you take the vengeance that I cannot."

Look at me.

It was not a request, and, even if it had been, Dannie realised as he found himself lifting his head, he wouldn't have been able to refuse.

He looked into the terrible darkness of the Old Father's eyes. The void looked back into him.

In an instant, he remembered, not just the horror of what the peasants had done to his caravan, but everything that they had ever done to it: every stone that had been thrown at their wagons, every insult that had been hurled at them, every merchant that had refused to pay, and every bandit and baron that had robbed them.

Suddenly, the Old Father seemed like nothing but a friend, a light in the darkness, the cure for all of his ills.

"I have brought you a gift," he said and, with no hesitation, he pulled back his sleeve, laid the steel kiss of the razor across his skin, and cut. Blood spurted, black in the darkness, and he caught it within the golden chalice that the petru had given him.

The Old Father's entourage whimpered with hunger as the smell of the fresh, pulsing blood filled their nostrils, and the bones shifted beneath their feet as they circled in the darkness.

Dannie squeezed his fist so that the blood flowed faster. Then he cut again.

It wasn't until the goblet was full that he presented it to his lord. Taloned fingers reached out to accept the offering, and the Old Father slurped the liquid down. The sound echoed horribly, and Dannie found himself thinking of the ghou that he had seen devoured by its own kin. The pain and the shock of his wounding hit him for the first time, and he felt suddenly, dangerously dizzy.

When the Old Father had finished, he tossed the cup behind him.

Go now. I will take your vengeance with as much relish as I have taken your blood.

"Thank you, lord," Dannie said, and, bowing all the while, he walked backwards away from the creature. The last he saw of it, before the darkness swallowed it back up, was the pink smear of his own blood around the pallid flesh of its mouth. Once out of the cavern Dannie turned and, in the same movement, collapsed. Mihai, although still dazed by the horror of what he had seen, caught the lantern before it smashed. Then he knelt down to wrap his bandanna around the deep, gaping wounds that Dannie had sliced into his arm. When it

was tight enough, he slung his friend over one shoulder and hurried away. It seem like a lifetime, before, sweating with a lot more than the effort of carrying his friend, he finally emerged back into the coolness of the night.

The sight of his comrades waiting for him was the sweetest he had ever seen. His face split open in a smile of relief, and, even as he laid Dannie down, he let out a sob of relief. The petru shot him a cold look, and then knelt down to examine Dannie.

“He saw the Old Father, then,” the old man said, as he began work on the wounds in Dannie’s arms.

“Yes,” Mihai said, suddenly feeling a little dizzy himself. “How did you know?”

“His hair,” the petru said as he smeared some ointment onto the wounds.

Mihai’s mouth opened to ask what he meant. Then he saw. In the pale light of the setting moon, he realised, for the first time, that the black mane of Dannie’s hair had turned completely, flawlessly white.

“Well, young man,” the petru told the unconscious patient as he bandaged his arm. “It seems that you are a petru after all.”

With that, Dannie was hoisted up, and the five of them hurried away.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Judge a dog by his master and a master by his dog.”

– Strigany saying Averland’s audience chamber was not a cheerful place. It was a cold, austere room, dominated by an empty fireplace. There was a great table in the centre of the room, which had once groaned beneath Averland’s ancestors’ enthusiasm for feasting, but now remained always empty.

The current elector count didn’t believe in gluttony.

Even the figures on the tapestries seemed miserable, their expressions faded by the joylessness of the place. The huntsmen and animals, and wenches that cavorted through the old wall hangings had been commissioned by rowdier men than the current Averland, who, apart from the occasional shriek of rage, went through his life with the anxious solemnity of a professional mourner.

The elector count sat, silent and morose, at the end of his audience chamber. In front of him, a yellow parchment had been pinned to an easel, the towns, rivers and roads of the Empire inked onto it. Here and there, marks indicated where his men had found and dealt with Strigany caravans; those Strigany caravans that had been small enough for the cowards to handle, anyway.

Averland felt his anger welling up at the thought of all those that his men had allowed to escape from his lands. The knowledge that so many had escaped, disappearing like sand through an hourglass, filled him with a black despair. It eclipsed the joy that he should have felt at the number of the filthy creatures that had been dealt with.

It was all his retainers’ fault: all their fault that the exhilaration that had marked the beginning of this great quest had curdled into the depression that lay so heavily upon him now. Averland felt like a fisherman who had found the greatest shoal of his life only to discover that his net had been destroyed by the incompetence of his servants.

Unfortunately, even punishing them hadn’t helped to lift his mood. After the last of them had been flogged into bloody ruins, the fact remained that Averland was perhaps partly to blame for the failure. After all, he had hired the fools in the first place.

So it was that he had summoned the man, who stood before him now, almost as an act of contrition.

Blysedén, he was called. Marshal Blysedén he had been once, and then Witch Finder Blysedén. Now, after one of the many disputes that had marked the mercenary’s career, he was just plain old Blysedén again.

He was short and stocky, with a peasant’s lumpen face, and a butcher’s meaty arms. There was something of the butcher in the way

he bore himself, too. He had the quiet confidence of a man who has mastered an important trade.

Perhaps, Averland thought vaguely, he might be as competent as he seems... Perhaps.

"So," he said, finally deigning to acknowledge the man, "Blyseden."

"Yes, my lord," Blyseden said. His beard jutted as he lifted his head, as if proud at the very mention of his name.

"Yes," Averland sighed, gesturing towards the map. "See that, Blyseden? That's a map, and those marks are where my men have managed to wash it of Strigany."

"Yes, my lord," Blyseden said, nodding. "I have heard about their endeavours."

"Endeavours," Averland said, laughing bitterly. "Yes, I suppose you could call them that."

The elector count lapsed back into resentful silence as he thought about the caravan that some of his hirelings had lost just two weeks ago. They had found it poisoning some villagers, but when they had tried to inflict justice upon it, the idiot captain had got himself killed, and the rest of his men had fled.

Averland dwelt upon the bittersweet memory of the flogging he had rewarded the survivors with. He had thrown up afterwards: all that blood.

Blyseden watched the expressions that played across the elector count's face, impassively. He had the natural patience of the born predator. He would wait all day, or all week. It made no difference to him.

"The Strigany," Averland said at last, dragging himself back to the matter at hand, "are a cancer within the flesh of our lands. Don't you agree, Blyseden?"

"Yes, my lord," Blyseden said without the slightest hesitation.

"Yes, my lord," Averland repeated. "Agreeable fellow, aren't you?"

"Yes, my lord," Blyseden agreed.

Averland looked at him, and was seized with a sudden, horrible suspicion that he was being made fun of. Well, he'd soon see about that.

"Tell me, Blyseden, what happened when you were a marshal?"

"I killed my lord's enemies," the man said simply.

"Very commendable," Averland said, "and what else?"

"There was little time for anything else, my lord."

Averland, whose patience never stretched to games of cat and mouse, scowled.

"I mean, why were you removed?" he snapped.

"I had to burn a so-called shrine where some of my lord's enemies had taken refuge," Blysedon said mildly, "and, in order to burn the shrine, I had to burn the town around it. I couldn't take the risk of any of my lord's enemies escaping, so I ordered my men to kill every living thing that came out of the flames."

"Women?" Averland asked. "Children?"

"Yes, my lord," Blysedon nodded, speaking with the satisfaction of a man who has done a difficult job well. "Some of my men mutinied, so I killed them too."

"Yes, I've heard about Grenborst. How many did you kill in all?" Averland asked.

"All of them, my lord. I am very thorough."

Averland shifted on his throne, and scratched at his chin. He was starting to cheer up.

"All of them, hey? Well, well done, and yet still you were removed."

"Politics, my lord," Blysedon explained with a shrug. "I don't bear a grudge."

"Very decent of you."

"Thank you, my lord."

"Then you were a witch finder, apparently. What happened with that? Not your true vocation, perhaps."

"I don't have a vocation, my lord," Blysedon told him, "unless it is to be as good a workman as I can be. I had to leave the business of witch finding because I hated to see work done so badly."

"Really?" Averland asked with a hint of disappointment. "One of these people who disagree with their methods, are you? Wouldn't have thought you'd be the sort."

"It was the sloppiness I couldn't stand, my lord," Blysedon told him. "They would burn one or two people, but not their family, or their village. Sorcery's like lice, I reckon. To get rid of one you've got to get rid of them all. Anyway, I finished my contract by doing what should have been done in the first place. It worked, too, my lord. As far as I know, there have been no further reports of witchcraft from the province where I worked."

"No," Averland mused, "I suppose there wouldn't be any more accusations if the accusers knew that... Well, never mind."

"Yes, my lord."

Averland sucked his teeth, and thought about what he had heard. He thought about what he knew. The Grenborst massacre was infamous, and, as to Blysedon's time as a witch hunter, the number of his victims was quite astonishing. One report said that the fat that melted from his quarries' burning bodies had run thick enough to grease the square of an entire town. Other villages had been

slaughtered to the last inhabitant.

It took a lot to be called overzealous by the Empire's witch hunters, but Blysedon had managed it. Yet here he stood, recounting these atrocities with no more emotion than if he'd been discussing the weather.

Averland suspected that, at last, he had found a worthy tool for the work that lay ahead.

"Tell me, Blysedon, how do you feel about the Strigany?"

"I don't feel anything, my lord," Blysedon said.

"What?" Averland asked, his voice flat with disappointment.

"I never feel anything for my employers' enemies, my lord, no more than a rat catcher thinks about the vermin he deals with."

Averland smiled with relief. He had been right about this man after all. For a moment, his expression took on a warmth that eased the bitter wrinkles of his face, and he almost looked handsome.

"It would seem, Blysedon," he decided, "that you are indeed the man I need. Looking for a job at the moment?"

"I am indeed, my lord."

"Good," Averland said. He cast off his cloak and bounded out of his chair. His depression had vanished like dew beneath the heat of his renewed enthusiasm, and he gripped Blysedon's shoulder with the sudden, bubbly joy of a child. "Come take another look at the map," He said. "Your work will take you south, to a place called Flintmar, and, I think that it will make you a very rich man."

Averland began to explain his plan, his gestures becoming more expansive and his tone more excitable by the minute.

Blysedon was impressed. This aristocrat might look like the usual weak-blooded fop, he thought, but, by Morr, he thought big.

CHAPTER NINE

“May you live long enough to bury your children.”

– Strigany curse Malfi rode alongside the wagons as they hurtled along between the tangled hedges. The wagoners were intent on driving their horses forwards, their cries lost between the bounce and sway, and crash of their vehicles along the rutted road.

The domnu hung back so that the caravan could overtake him, and then glanced up to see if the flock of ravens still circled overhead. They were, and he muttered a blessing, thanking them for the luck that they had brought today. This morning had almost been their last: almost, but not quite, not yet.

He looked back, and counted the broken arrow shafts that still stubbled the last few wagons. He let them overtake him, and noted the axe stroke that had scored the back door of the last wagon, the blow a white crescent against the varnished wood.

“Any sign of the peasants?” he called as he fell in beside the rest of the caravan’s outriders.

“Not since that ford, domnu,” one of them told him, raising his voice to be heard above the clattering wagons, “but they can’t be far off. Unless they’ve given up.”

“No,” Malfi said, shaking his head, “they won’t give up, not unless we make them.”

Another of the Strigany grinned, baring his yellow teeth in a humourless smile.

“Make them give up, is it, domnu? And why not? By Ushoran’s tail, you’re getting quite good at that. Maybe you should thank Averland for the education.”

“Oh yes, I’d like to thank him, and the pig’s sphincter that made him, both,” Malfi said, and, despite the sweat that slicked their bodies and the blood that had splattered some of them, his men laughed.

“Right,” the domnu said, turning in his saddle so that they could all hear him, “I reckon we should set up an ambush of our own. Those cowardly bastards drew us into their town before the attack. We’ll return the favour from the next bit of forest.”

“Where is it?”

“Just up-” The domnu broke off. Over the shoulder of one of his men, he thought that he’d seen the first of the ragged mix of watchmen and volunteers that had pounced upon them earlier. Then he realised that he must have been mistaken, and carried on.

“Just up ahead,” he said, “these hedges give way to woodland in about a mile. I say we wait there, give them a bloody nose, and then follow the caravan.”

“Sounds good,” one of the men said, nodding with bloodthirsty anticipation. “I saw one of those wretches shooting Anja. He’ll regret it.”

“They all will in time,” Malfi said, “but this isn’t a battle. We just hit them hard, spill some blood, and go while the going’s still good, yes?”

“Yes, domnu,” his men chorused, and, satisfied, Malfi spurred his horse back up the line to tell the wagon drivers what was going to happen.

They accepted the plan without argument or surprise. Since they had first prised the proclamation of banishment from the dead mercenary’s hand, their lives had degenerated into a string of desperate measures, one following so quickly from another that their lives had become a blur of action and reaction.

Malfi knew that other caravans would have fared better. The problem was that his people were so few in number. With barely three dozen adults, every baron, bandit and burgermeister was willing to try to loot them, and all in the name of civic duty.

Not that any of them have succeeded, Malfi thought with a grim pride.

He reached the lead wagon to find Chera holding the reins.

“Take them through the wood as fast as you can,” he told her above the squeak of the harness, and the clatter of hooves and iron rimmed wheels. “We’ll hold back a bit. See if we’re still being followed.”

“I want to stay with you,” Chera said, looking down at her father. “Any of the children can drive a wagon. I want to fight.”

Malfi winked at her in a way that had infuriated her ever since she’d been a little girl.

“Want all you like, my dear,” he told her, “your job’s to lead the caravan.”

Chera scowled, and Malfi felt a sudden stab of gratitude for the fates that had gifted him with such a lovely daughter. She was perfect, beautiful. Always had been, and always would be.

He felt a sudden surge of gratitude for Petru Maria, too, and for the miracle that she had worked on Chera’s complexion. Despite the rigours of their flight, the old woman had worked a powerful cure on Chera’s plague-ravaged countenance. The scars had vanished and the pock marks filled. Her complexion had become as beautiful as her character, as beautiful as that little girl they had rescued on the day they had learned of their exile. Such a shame that the child had run away just the night after.

That was a shame. She had been such a sweet little thing.

“Anyway,” he told Chera, dragging his thoughts back to the task

in hand, “you’ve always been able to get the best out of the horses, especially now that we’re so near to Flintmar, and you know how many young men must be waiting there for you.”

“Shut up,” Chera said, and, too her father’s delight, she blushed, a rosy glow suffusing her smooth cheeks.

“Now is that any way to speak to your domnu?” he asked her ingenuously, and she smiled in spite of herself.

“Go on off, then,” she told him with a sniff. “Have all the fun, while the women are left to do the work as usual.”

“Yes, my dear,” he said, and, as the approaching woodland came back into view between the hedges, he rode back down the line to where his men were waiting. Their swords were loose in their scabbards, and those with crossbows already had them strung and drawn. The last of the hedges had collapsed back into the common land that surrounded the wood, and, for the first time, Malfi could see quite how wide the forest was. It stretched from horizon to horizon, a tangled wilderness, wide enough to hide an army in.

“Maybe we should start tying off some tripwires and nooses,” Malfi mused as the first wagons of the caravan passed the outlying trees, “or maybe, some of us should try to lead them off into the forest. I bet it’s easy to get lost in there.”

Before anybody could answer there was a sudden commotion from the front of the caravan.

Malfi froze in his saddle at the scream of a falling horse, the crash of a toppling wagon, and a chorus of savage cries. One after the other, the rest of the wagons crashed to a halt, some of them slewing around, as panicking horses tried to escape.

Spurring his horse forwards, Malfi skittered around the wreckage and confusion as he made his way back to the front of the caravan. It wasn’t until he stood in his stirrups to look over the wreckage of another toppled wagon that he realised what a terrible mistake he had made.

There was to be an ambush in the woods, as he had planned.

What he hadn’t planned was that his people would be the victims. Their pursuers, natives of this land, had somehow reached the wood before them. Now, they streamed forwards from the trees, galloping down the line of jammed wagons like wolves around a herd of cattle.

Malfi ignored them as he rode wide, trying to see which of the wagons he had heard crash. He knew which of them it must have been to have halted the entire column, but was hoping that he was wrong, please, that he was wrong.

He wasn’t. Chera’s wagon lay on its side, the wheels still spinning. One horse lay dead in the traces, a flight of arrows embedded in its flank. The other, bloodied and panicked, was kicking and biting as it

tried to get free from the traces.

There was Chera. Malfi felt something in his chest tear as he saw her standing there, perched on top of the wagon. She held a whip in one hand, and, although she never so much as brushed the horses' skin with it, she showed no qualms about using it on the men who surrounded her. The raw hide flicked and hissed, blurring through the air with a serpent's speed to flay strips of skin off her attackers.

Four of them had gathered around her wagon, and, although they ducked and cursed as they closed in, Malfi was glad that none had yet thought to draw back and use a bow. They must want to capture her for...

He snarled, unslung his blunderbuss, and spurred his horse forward. As he raced forward, a thickset lad, who looked to have stolen his father's plough horse to join in the fun, swung an axe at the domnu's head. Malfi ducked under the blow and, sparing the fool barely a glance, punched a dagger into his neck as he galloped past. Blood spouted as the lad collapsed, already forgotten as Malfi charged through a knot of combat to save his daughter.

Not that she needed saving more than anybody else. As Malfi's horse jumped the body of another that had fallen in its path, he saw that she had already dealt with one of her attackers. She had wrapped the tip of the whip around his neck as tightly as a strangler's squeeze, and then pulled, so that the man's neck was broken before he even hit the ground.

His three comrades paused at the sight of his broken body, and drew back. One of them, obviously deciding that this prize wasn't worth the risk, drew a hunting bow from behind his saddle and nocked an arrow into the string.

Without pausing, Malfi lowered his blunderbuss, aimed at the man, and fired.

The storm of fire and shrapnel obliterated the bowman. Unfortunately, it also sliced through the ear of Malfi's horse. With a scream, the beast reared up, and the domnu hurtled through the air. He bounced off the coarse grass, and rolled until he hit the side of Chera's overturned wagon.

Ignoring the dizziness and the whining in one ear, he blinked the blood out of his eyes, and looked around. The whip flashed and whined overhead as Chera targeted the third of her assailants. The fourth was hanging back. The man was a burgher, and his horse hadn't been trained for war any more than he had. It skittered nervously as its master struggled to draw back the string of his crossbow.

Malfi acted without thinking. His fingers closed on a rock beside him, he drew back his arm and threw. It bounced off of the

crossbowman's skull with a sound like a spoon cracking a boiled egg, and the man collapsed, caught in the stirrups as his horse bolted.

"Domnu!"

He turned instinctively at the cry that came from back down the caravan. As he did so, he saw a split second of the club that was being swung towards his head. There was a flash of light, and then oblivion. Maria was deaf to the sounds of battle outside. She lay on the hard wooden floor of her wagon, completely at peace with herself and with her world. Her bony hands were folded on her chest, and her eyes were closed. A pulse beat weakly beneath the liver-spotted skin of her throat, and she breathed slowly: so slowly that the rise and fall of her withered chest was barely perceptible.

Something crashed into the side of the her wagon, and it tilted to one side before crashing back down onto its wheels. Her body shifted with the impact, but Maria didn't notice. Although her physical form had been rolled to one side, her spirit remained untouched, safe within the minds of her familiars as they wheeled in the sky above.

There were many of them and their flock was strong. Maria had been building it as the caravan had travelled, gathering ravens on the way. She had woven them into a single great flock skilfully, and it had taken skill, for she had only taken the strongest birds.

Over the past weeks, her life had been devoted to selflessly caring for them, at least, that part of her life which she cared to remember. She had often provided the ravens with so much meat that they'd been barely able to fly up to their roosts at night. Yesterday, she had even killed a lamb for them.

Today, Maria had decided, it was time for them to repay her efforts.

In her current form, it was difficult to explain even this to the birds as they flocked overhead. Still, explain she did, or, if not explain, at least command. Maria's will held the flock in a grip stronger than that of any fist, and when she turned their collective gaze down to the battle below, even the stupidest knew what to do.

It was the hunger that did it: the hunger that she filled them with, the hunger for the living eyeballs that glistened within the orbits of their victims' faces, and the entrails that nestled in their stomachs.

One moment, the ravens were unnoticed overhead, as irrelevant to the battling men as the wind in the trees or the blue of the sky. The next, they were falling like a flight of black-feathered arrows.

The birds' sense of self-preservation melted away beneath their need to sate the inflamed desire that she had filled them with, and they struck with a fearlessness that was as terrifying to their victims as were their beaks and claws. The men shouted in surprise, and then fear. Then, seconds later, in agony.

As the first of the ravens plucked its prize from its victim's skull, Maria's body, lying still and lifeless in her wagon, began to smile.

Malfi woke up to a splitting headache, a roll of nausea, and the most beautiful sight in the world.

"Chera," he croaked up at his daughter as she leaned over him.

"Lie still," she told him, pressing down on his shoulder as he tried to get up. He lay back, and, blinking in the gloom, realised that he was in the back of a wagon, a moving wagon if the squeak of the harness and the bumps in the road were anything to go by.

Then he remembered the blow that had laid him low.

"How did we escape?" he asked, suddenly frantic. "How is everybody else?" Ignoring his daughter's ministrations, he raised his body up onto his elbows and peered out of the back door.

"We escaped thanks to Petru Maria," Chera told him. "At least, that's what we all think, although she won't say anything. Some of us have been wounded, although only horses were killed."

"But how?" Malfi asked, and gingerly touched the lump on his forehead. He winced, and wished that he hadn't.

"It was a miracle," Chera told him, and gazed past him to the empty blue of the skies above. "The birds came to our aid. Those of our enemies that they didn't blind, they panicked. It was wonderful."

Malfi looked at her, surprised by the rapturous expression on her face. He had seen the petru's enchantments at work before, and, although they were many things, they were hardly wonderful; apart from the way she had cleared Chera's skin, of course.

"So the birds... oh, never mind. I'll ask her," he told Chera. "Anyway, I have to go and check the caravan. See how everybody is."

"They're fine," Chera told him, "but you need to rest."

"No, I'm all right."

Chera didn't argue, she just poked the bump on his forehead.

"That didn't hurt then?" she asked as he yelled.

"Maybe you're right," the domnu said, as a fit of dizziness made him lie back down. The unlit lantern swayed on its hook above him. The glass panels had all been smashed when the wagon had been overturned.

"As long as you promise not to move," Chera told him, twisting around to rummage in her chest, "I'll play a song for you. Deal?"

She turned back to him, holding her harp. It was a beautiful

thing, the intricately-carved walnut glowing with varnish, and the strings perfectly formed from brass and ivory.

“Of course it’s a deal,” Malfi said, and smiled. As far as he was concerned, his daughter had a voice sweeter than any elf maiden’s, and her fingers were even more skilled on the strings than they were with a billhook.

Chera smiled, settled back, and struck a chord. It was mellowed by the wooden confines of the wagon, and when she began to sing, Malfi realised that it was one of the lullabies he had taught her when she had been a child.

Sleep well as the wagon sways
For tomorrow the horses will graze
In fresh new fields
We’ll find fresh new deals
Safely beneath the gaze
Of

The Old Fathers Malfi closed his eyes and smiled in appreciation. It was the same simple ditty that had been sung to Strigany children for generations, yet Chera had woven it into something much more. The showering notes of her harp, and the sweet, smooth honey of her voice could have graced any Tilean opera house, or Empire concert hall.

Sleep well as the wagon yaws
For tomorrow you and yours
Will find bright new things
Fit for kings
Safely beneath the claws
Of
The Old Fathers
Sleep well on the bumps of your bed
You’re hungry, but tomorrow you’ll be fed
On the kindness of the land
Or the speed of your hand
Safely beneath the dread
Of

The Old Fathers Chera ended, and Malfi clapped, despite the throbbing of his head. “Bravo!” he cried, and Chera blushed.

“Don’t be so silly,” she said, and looked down shyly. “It’s not that good.”

“It’s better than good,” her father told her. “It’s a rare talent you have.”

“Anybody can sing,” she said, looking pleased in spite of herself. “Do you want me to carry on?”

“Forever!” Main said with a flourish of his hands.

Chera giggled and tightened one of the keys on her harp, but, before she could continue, there was a knocking on the frame of their wagon. A moment later, the wagon lurched as one of the wagon masters stepped onto the running board.

"Is the domnu recovered yet?" he asked Chera.

"No," she said.

"Of course I am," Malfi said, sitting up. "Just resting my eyes. Why, what is it?"

"There're some men up ahead, blocking the exit from the forest: lots of men, armed."

Malfi cursed, and started to pull on his boots.

"How far off are they?" he asked, and, taking his blunderbuss off the rack, he began to load it.

"About half a mile, domnu. We slowed as soon as we saw them. Shall we stop?"

"I'll come and see," Malfi said, and, when he had jammed in the wadding that would hold the charge in his weapon, he slung it over his shoulder, and stepped onto the running board. From there, he climbed onto the spare horse that was tethered behind the wagon.

"Stay here," he told Chera as he clipped his heels into the horse's flank, and trotted off. The wagon master made to follow him, and then paused and looked back at Chera.

"He's right, you know, about the music."

She put her hands up to cover her face, an automatic gesture that had become as ingrained as breathing. Then she realised that she didn't have to, not anymore. She lowered them, but the wagon master had already left, galloping after the domnu. The men who had blocked the road had waited until the forest had withered away into a vast, tangled heath. It was a well chosen spot. Swathes of gorse competed with forests of brambles, and tussocks of sharp, withered grass. Here and there, malarial pools lay within the mat of vegetation, and hungry patches of quicksand awaited the unwary.

It was, Malfi decided, impassable to their horses, let alone the wagons they drew.

He had felt a moment's surprise to discover such a wilderness. With so many land-hungry men, it was unusual to find a place so devoid of any signs of cultivation, even land that needed to be reclaimed like this. Then he had looked up and realised why.

At first glance, he had taken the dark mass that loomed over the horizon for storm clouds. When he realised what the towering shapes really were, he felt a lift of optimism.

"The Black Mountains," he said, shifting in his saddle, and gesturing towards them. "Almost there."

"Might as well be back where we started for all the good that will

do us," one of his men replied. "Can't see us getting past those in a hurry."

Malfi looked at the men who waited behind their makeshift barricade. It was a solidly built thing made of bundles of sharpened staves. The black, fire-hardened spikes had been arranged so that they jutted out at a horse's chest height, and a wall of them stretched across the road and into the depths of the bog on either side.

Malfi watched the men who waited behind the barricade. There were a couple of dozen of them, and, if they knew their business as well as he suspected, there would be a couple of dozen more hidden in the undergrowth on either side of the road.

"Damn," another man said, and spat. "To think we got this far before having to turn back."

"Who said anything about turning back?" Malfi asked.

"You don't think we can fight through that lot, I hope, not with half of our men wounded already."

"No, but they're men, not orcs, and we have gold."

The wagon master made a noise in the back of his throat. Malfi ignored him. Instead, he touched his heels to his horse's flanks, and it walked towards the barricade. Malfi realised that it was built in the Strigany style, light and robust, and smiled bitterly at the memory.

One of the men, seeing his approach, wriggled through the barricade, and started to stroll towards him.

He was a big man, and there was something about him that brought a frown to Malfi's face. Then, when he saw the scarring that covered one of the man's eye sockets, his face split into a sudden, joyful grin.

"Brock!" he cried, and spurred his mount forwards. He swung out of the saddle at the last moment, and embraced the man before him with a roar of relief.

"Brock! You had us worried for a minute."

Brock, his grin wide enough to match his old comrade's, shook him by the shoulders.

"You should be worried, Malfi, the way you play cards. Anyway," he said, turning to sweep a hand towards the bitter wilderness behind him, "let me be the first to welcome you to Flintmar."

Malfi took another look at the wasteland and the jagged teeth of the mountains that seemed to snarl over it.

"Home sweet home," he said, and turned back to lead his caravan to safety.

CHAPTER TEN

“The good old days. The all or nothing, blood and gold, win or run days. When I think back to how it was to be a mercenary, I wonder why I ever gave it up. Compared to trying to tell a bunch of Strigany what to do, those wars were just one, long holiday.”

– Domnu Brock Blysedden sat on a three-legged stool in the corner of the inn. His fingers were in his belt, and he was looking up at his guest with the suspicious appraisal of a farmer who was thinking about buying a cow.

The same could not be said of the men that Aver-land had given to him. The pair of guards, who stood behind their new master, were clutching their halberds to their chests with the terrified grip of men who needed something to hold onto. Meanwhile, the clerk, a pot-bellied man with the unfortunate name of Tubs, was hunched so closely over his ink pot that he looked as though he was about to crawl inside it.

The rest of the inn’s customers had long since departed. After all, there were other inns in Aver-land, and almost none of them contained the sort of monstrosity that Blysedden had summoned.

The mercenary regarded the ogre frankly. Within the confines of the taproom, it seemed massive. No, he corrected himself, it didn’t just seem massive, it was massive.

Its stomach alone was the size of a small sheep, as were some of the slabs of muscle that bulged from its lumpen body. It might have been hunchbacked, or that might just have been the way it stood. Either way, its blank, imbecilic face loomed over every man in the room.

Yet, for all the animal’s strength, Blysedden noted that the creature had adopted a soldier’s vanity. The misshapen boulder of its head gleamed beneath a layer of scented oil, the smell of which mingled with its own to create an odour like that of an embalmed corpse. It wore a scarlet waistcoat, too, from which the grey immensity of its gut protruded. It even had a pair of breeches.

Blysedden wondered what colour they had been originally. It was certainly impossible to tell now. The stains that covered them created an unbroken mosaic across the cloth, which in any case seemed about to burst.

“So,” Blysedden said, locking eyes with the vacant stare of the ogre, “you have come to ask about a commission.”

The ogre said nothing. Instead, it slammed a hand down on the table with a bang that sounded as loud as a cannon shot. Blysedden’s guards jumped to attention, and his clerk screamed. The ogre

withdrew his palm and Blysedden saw the poster that now rested on the cracked oak of the table.

"This is true," the ogre said, the boom of its voice lacking the slightest inflection.

"It is true," Blysedden replied, realising that the statement had been a question. "I need soldiers to kill some of my lord's enemies. Do you have many soldiers?"

"We are twelve," the ogre said, and Blysedden blinked.

"You mean that there are eleven others like yourself?" he asked.

The ogre said nothing.

Blysedden rephrased the question. "Are there eleven others like you who want a job?" he asked.

The ogre pondered the question for a moment, or perhaps it was thinking about something else. There was absolutely no way of knowing what was going on behind the idiot glitter of the thing's eyes.

"Yes," it said eventually.

"Good," Blysedden said with a nod. It wasn't the first time he had dealt with ogres, but somehow they seemed to get stupider by the year. "What weapons will you bring?"

"Edged steel," the ogre told him. "Iron clubs. Teeth."

Blysedden nodded. Judging by the hemispherical muscles that bulged around the ogre's jaws, its teeth would probably be sufficient on their own. It would feed well after the slaughter was done, that was for sure..

"I will pay one penny a day," Blysedden told him, "and a share of the loot."

"What share?" the ogre snapped out the question as quickly as the closing jaws of a trap.

"You and all of the other soldiers divide three-quarters of it amongst yourselves," Blysedden decided. "The final quarter is mine."

The ogre lapsed back into silence. After a while, drool started to seep from one side of its mouth. Blysedden waited.

"One silver penny a day," it eventually said, "each, and food: meat. The rest is acceptable."

"Acceptable," Blysedden said, "for soldiers who have fought before. Have you fought before?"

The ogre looked at him, and, for a moment, Blysedden thought that he could detect a flash of contempt in the shadowed caverns of the thing's eyes.

"Yes," it said.

Blysedden thought about pressing the issue, but decided that he didn't have time. Anyway, this creature was obviously battle-tested. It wasn't just the brutality of its movements or the pale scars that criss-crossed its slate-grey hide. It was the way that it had known exactly

what it and its fellows were worth.

“Good,” Blysedon said, nodding. “Tell me your name, and the clerk will get you signed up.”

“Gorfang,” said the ogre, and with a single step it was looming over the clerk. The man whimpered and drew back.

“Sign Menheer Gorfang onto the roster, Tubs,” Blysedon told him.

The clerk swallowed and started to write down the terms. The feather of his quill shook even when he had finished. Then he looked up at the ogre with the bright, panicked eyes of a rabbit in a snare.

“You...” he said, and then stopped, swallowed, and tried again. “You have to make a mark here,” he finally said, pointing towards the bottom of the parchment.

Gorfang said nothing. He merely reached down, plucked the quill from the clerk’s trembling fingers, and, to everybody’s surprise, signed with a clearly legible initial.

“Thank you,” the clerk squeaked, as the ogre returned his quill.

The ogre ignored him and turned back to Blysedon.

“I am hungry for today’s meat. Can I take this one?” He pointed to the clerk who, with a final, terrified whimper, slid off his stool in a dead faint.

“No,” Blysedon told him. “No man flesh until I say. I will send beef later.”

The ogre shrugged, and marched out of the inn. Humans, he thought, no sense of humour. “Most noble of commanders, it is as the poets say. Only in war can a man truly find the truth of himself. I and my esteemed brethren have followed this maxim from the lands of our birth in beautiful Tilea to the miserable dankness of your lands, and it is that which brings us here today.”

The Tilean finished his speech, and, with a gesture that had doubtless been practised in front of a thousand mirrors, he swept off his hat and bowed.

“You want to join up?” Blysedon asked.

“Of course.” The Tilean’s perfectly-waxed moustaches twitched at Blysedon’s bluntness, but he let it pass. He expected nothing else from the beefy-faced denizens of the Empire.

“You can see from my bearing that I am a veteran of a thousand desperate actions,” he explained, “and my brethren are almost my equals. In Remas, I learned the best, the most noble art of swordsmanship, and excelled above all others. In Quenelles, I fought single-handed against a Bretonnian knight, and showed him the true meaning of chivalry. In Nuln, I shot in the tournament of artilleryists, and demonstrated to the experts how a true marksman behaves.”

“Did you win?”

“I beg your pardon?”

"In these actions, did you win?"

"I acquitted myself," the Tilean said haughtily, "with distinction."

"Well," Blysedden allowed, "I suppose you're still alive. This job might not be one for gentlemen such as you, though. It is more a matter of husbandry. Those who we slaughter will hardly be up to your level."

The Tilean grinned.

"Saving yourself, most honoured of commanders, who ever is?" he asked. "That is why we have travelled so far, braving all the hardships and terrible cooking of this soggy land. It is always in search of the most righteous opponent. The knights of Bretonnia know something of this, too, although their understanding is clouded by superstition."

"What I want to know is," Blysedden asked, "if I tell you to kill somebody, will you kill them?"

"My blade has known little rest in its lifetime," the Tilean assured him. "The steel thirsts for the blood of my enemies, or, for a small consideration, of yours."

Blysedden grunted.

"That will do. How many are you, and what weapons do you carry?"

"There are two score men in my company, all armed with the rapiers and daggers of our profession. More than that, we are armed with the cunning of a fox, the hearts of lions—"

"And the tongues of fishwives," one of Blysedden's guards interrupted, and his comrade laughed.

"What?" the Tilean asked.

"Relax," the guard told him. "Just a joke."

He shifted and glanced quickly at Blysedden. Blysedden studiously ignored him and watched a rat scurrying along one of the ceiling beams instead.

"You called me a fishwife," the Tilean reminded the guard, "a woman."

It was said mildly enough, but suddenly nobody was laughing.

"I said you had a tongue like one," the guard said, embarrassed into defiance.

The Tilean nodded with a gentle understanding. "Choose your weapons," he said.

"Don't be a fool," the guard said uneasily and shifted his grip on the haft of his halberd. He looked at Blysedden again, but his commander was idly cleaning his fingernails.

"You call me a fool, to boot," the Tilean mused. "Very well. I choose the weapons that we are both comfortable with. En garde."

"Look, friend—" the guard began, but it was too late. The Tilean

was already moving. The sleeves of his shirt billowed out in just the fashion that his tailor had intended, and the gold filigree of his rapier caught the light in a way that would have delighted the jeweller who had made it. The Tilean was moving in what could almost have been a dancer's pirouette.

The razor-sharp tip of his blade cut through the guard's throat like a branding iron through snow. As the man fell back, arterial blood spraying those who stood around him. The Tilean struck again, the blade blurring as he sliced a series of cuts onto the dying guard's chest.

The remaining guard looked at Blysedden for guidance. Blysedden just shrugged.

"Elegant," he said, and the Tilean brought his blade up in a complex salute. The spray of blood from his victim's severed arteries had already slowed to a trickle, and the man lay in the wetness of his own ruin, twitching out the last seconds of his life beneath the dead weight of his unused halberd.

"Those are my company's initials," the Tilean said, gesturing to the twin Vs that he had cut into the guard's chest, "Vespero's Vendetta."

Blysedden nodded.

"A copper penny each a day," he said, "and your share of the loot."

The Tilean, who had produced a stained silk handkerchief to wipe down his blade, pursed his lip.

"It is a fair offer," he said, "but my brethren might feel insulted if you offered me, their beloved leader, only a copper penny. For the honour of the company we should make mine gold."

Blysedden glanced down at the cooling corpse of the guard at his feet.

"Far be it from me to risk insulting your men," he said. "You, personally, will be paid in gold, as you suggest. Now, if you would just sign the parchment, Menheer Vespero."

The clerk sat staring numbly at the corpse at his feet. A splatter of blood was drying on his face, but he made no move to clean it off. His ink pots, quills and parchments remained in front of him, untouched.

"Tubs!" Blysedden snapped at the man.

"Allow me to practise my penmanship," Vespero cut in smoothly and, dipping a quill into the ink, he wrote his own contract.

Blysedden checked it and signed it. If he was relieved that there was nothing that needed to be corrected, he didn't show it. He decided that if he ever wanted to insult a Tilean, he'd wait until the man was chained up first. "Why are you here? Cook, is it?"

The halfling who stood before Blysedden scowled. He didn't have

the face for it. His fat cheeks grew as red as a clown's, and his double chin bulged, so that he looked like a small, angry frog, not that anybody was likely to risk pointing that out. The blood of the guard who the Tilean had killed was still wet on the floor, a reminder of how mercenaries reacted to insults.

"I thought you wanted soldiers," the halfling said, "not cooks."

Blysedden shrugged.

"That we do, but an army needs cooks. I thought that's what you came for."

The halfling's cheeks darkened from red to puce, and he acted. He might have been as round as a cannon ball, but he also moved with the speed of one. His bow was in his hand before Blysedden's remaining guard had a chance to react, the bowstring already humming. The halfling's arrow zipped past Blysedden's left ear and disappeared through the entrance to the hearth room. There was a squeal and a thunk as the arrow buried itself in a wooden beam.

"Want me to cook that?" the halfling asked, gesturing after his arrow.

Blysedden turned to peer into the hearth room. The halfling's arrow still quivered in the wall, and a rat was skewered on its hardwood shaft.

"I see what you mean," Blysedden said. "You're hired."

The halfling grinned in a wide, white crescent and stepped forward to sign the contract. As he did so, one of the men Blysedden had positioned outside burst into the room, a wild expression on his face.

"What is it?" Blysedden asked impatiently. At first, the man merely opened and closed his mouth like a landed fish. Then he found his voice.

"More recruits, my lord."

"Well, show them in."

"I can't... I mean, you'd better come and meet them," the man said, and, before Blysedden could answer, he hurried back outside.

"You just can't get the men," Blysedden confided to the halfling, as, curiosity getting the better of him, he stalked outside to see who had turned up. By the time the week's hiring was done, Blysedden had recruited every mercenary, cut-throat, and beggar with a sword in Averland. At almost two thousand men, he was pleased at the size of his force. When he had last seen them, bivouacked outside of the city walls, they had been an impressive array, formidable, even.

His master, however, was not so sanguine.

"Are you sure that it will be enough?" Averland asked Blysedden after he had shuffled through the contracts before him. It had taken him until midnight to read through them all, questioning each detail,

but Blysedden didn't mind. At least he hadn't quibbled over the cost.

"I think that it will form a solid enough core, my lord. Ungrol and Belnar, especially," Blysedden said. He was bundled in a fur cape against the cold of the fireless audience chamber, but even so he shivered.

Averland wore only his tunic and hose. Lost in his world of calculation and obsession, he had no time for the cold, and he had only called for the single lantern in order to see the contracts that Blysedden had brought him.

"A core," he repeated, rolling the word around in his mouth.

"Yes, my lord. With you permission, I will continue to recruit as we make our way south. It will save on wages if we hire nearer to the battlefield."

"If you're sure," Averland said, sounding unconvinced. "You have no need to worry too much about the cost, as long as the job is done thoroughly."

"Thank you, my lord, but a good workman does not squander his resources." Especially, Blysedden silently added, when his share of the loot is a mere quarter.

Averland didn't acknowledge the response. Instead, he pushed the pile of contracts away and slumped back down into his throne. Blysedden, who was growing used to his master's idiosyncrasies, merely stood and waited to be dismissed.

"Do you wonder why I alone am prepared to undertake this great mission, Blysedden?" he asked.

"No, my lord."

"Well, I do. It is so clear to me what my duty is. I mean, I don't pretend to be any sort of saint, and Sig-mar knows I have my weaknesses. For example, I am a coward."

Blysedden opened his mouth to reply, and then decided not to. Wherever Averland was, it was somewhere far, far away from the room where he sat.

"I always have been, I suppose. Just the way that I was made. I never really had the talent of making friends, either. I don't know why."

Blysedden remained silent.

"But this task, this duty, it is so clear to me what I need to do that I have never had any doubt about it. I wonder why the other electors haven't done the same. The Strigany are such a blight on our lands, such a horror. None of my noble cousins would tolerate witches or mutants, so why Strigany?"

The elector lapsed into a silence that lasted for so long that Blysedden thought that he must have drifted off.

"I think I know why it is," he continued, his voice as calm as the

eye of a hurricane. "It's because they have been bewitched, ensorcelled. The only reason that I have escaped is because the spirit of my mother watches over me. I can see her even now."

Averland nodded towards the darkness, outside the cone of light that the single lantern cast, and Blysedden felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. For a moment, he knew, he just knew, that, if he turned, he would see the wraith of Averland's parent.

He shuddered again, and kept his eyes fixed on the lantern.

"She was a saintly woman, my mother, but they told such lies about her: terrible, terrible lies, filthy lies."

Despite the passion of his language, Averland's tone remained eerily calm.

"It was all the Striganies' doing," he went on, as if discussing nothing more controversial than the last night's dinner. "They wanted to destroy her. They hated her. They hated her so much."

Averland sighed.

Blysedden wondered if he should say something. He decided not to.

"They did it by whispering and lying, and sorcery," Averland explained. "They even got inside my head once, making me see things that weren't there. They did something to me, made me wrong. Can you believe that?"

Averland, remembering that Blysedden was there, looked up, and the mercenary realised that silence would no longer suffice.

"I know that they are an evil folk, my lord," he said carefully.

"Yes," Averland said, nodding gently. "Rats. Vermin. Filth. Cancer. Parasites."

The elector count's voice faded as he ran out of epithets. Then he leant forward to rest his head in his hands.

"You're dismissed, Blysedden," he said. "I will keep in touch by courier. And Blysedden?"

"Yes, my lord?"

"May Sigmar go with you."

"Thank you, my lord," Blysedden said, although he didn't plan on it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Drop an Empire cat and it will land on its feet. Drop a Strigany cat, and you will land on your head.”

– Empire saying Most of the Empire’s settlements had been created by the same natural forces that had created its forests, mountains and rivers. Marienburg, for example, had been formed by the flow of the River Reik. Its treacherous currents and shattered islands had drawn the first settlements of smugglers, and then their comrades, and then the merchants and artisans that the growing community had needed, and eventually the merchants themselves.

Talabheim, on the other hand, had been forged by stone rather than by water. Its sheer cliffs had made it a natural fortress for the first ragged hunters who had stumbled across it, and it had been inhabited by their ancestors ever since.

Then there was Nuln. Until the dwarf technology of black powder had fallen into the hands of man, the confluence of the embryonic iron and sulphur trade routes had been irrelevant. Then, the first cannon had been cast, and suddenly the village of Nuln had grown into the very arsenal of the Empire.

Flintmar was different. No trade routes fed it, or rivers, or roads. It guarded no mountain pass or rich farmlands. No religion found relevance in it, and no king had ever wanted it.

It was no more than a wasteland of sour water, bitter growth and constant, swarming mosquitoes.

Although there was no logical reason for it to exist, Flintmar did exist, the only settlement in the Empire to have been created by pure, unadulterated politics.

As the Strigany had arrived at this miserable place of exile, Flintmar had sprung up as suddenly as fungi on a forest floor, and, already its squalor was enough to equal any other town in the Empire.

No paving stones covered the mud of its roads. Its shallow latrines were more often than not open pits with perhaps a scrap of old canvas for privacy. Dogs roamed through the encampment, looking even leaner than usual, and clouds of flies had already begun to join the swarming mosquitoes that had gathered to add to the misery of the place.

That was Flintmar, a fitting tribute to the character of the man who had created it, and who, even now, was willing its destruction.

If any other people had been forced into such a place, no doubt their hearts would have broken, their spirits snapped, their will extinguished, but not the Strigany, and certainly not Dannie or Mihai.

They were, after all, about to fall in love.

Neither of the two men would ever forget the first time they saw her. At Brock's orders, the two of them had been walking around the ragged edges of their sprawling settlement, checking that the barricades were being properly maintained. They carried axes and coils of rope slung over their shoulders, and by the time they reached the loose, open circle of Malfi's caravan, they were already plastered with mud and sweat from their endeavours.

Chera, on the other hand, was as fresh as a new dawn. She had finished her day's work, and now sat, washed and refreshed, on the seat of her wagon. The thick rope of her braided ponytail gleamed on the pale skin of her shoulders, and the linen shift she wore was thin enough to reveal the supple grace of her body as she played the harp.

Both Dannie and Mihai stopped when they saw her. Chera didn't notice them. She was lost in the complexities of her instrument, and of the music that she was playing. It was a new composition, and, like all of her new compositions, it seemed to be writing itself. She felt as though her fingers were being played by the music, instead of the other way around, and she was lost in the race to keep up with the tune that played through her.

As the two men listened, the music changed. At first, it had been a lullaby, sweet enough for the sourest ear.

Now, it speeded up, building into a wild, beating rhythm that set their blood racing and their tired feet itching to move.

"Shall we?" Mihai asked turning to his friend with a mock bow.

Dannie looked at him uncomprehendingly. Mihai held out his arm, and Dannie grinned, only half embarrassed. He had got used to Mihai's sudden, wild enthusiasms.

"Come on," Mihai said, "with music like that it would be rude not to dance."

Dannie grinned, and, dropping his tools, began to dance. He linked arms with Mihai, and the two spun each other around in a high-kicking jig.

They were clumsy, tired by the day's labours, and heavy-footed with boots clogged with mud, but they danced with a will. A gaggle of children, who had been following them with the unthinking instinct of born pickpockets, started laughing. Then somebody started to clap a beat to accompany their stumbling performance, and soon others joined in.

By the time Chera realised that she had an audience, the two men were dancing in a ring of clapping Strigany. For a moment, she played on, her fingers flitting over the chords with a will of their own. Then she stopped, and the music came to an awkward halt.

Dannie and Mihai gave a final pirouette, and, to the cheers of their audience, bowed. When they turned to Chera, it was to find her

blushing bright red.

She looks as delicate as the first blush of colour on a new rose, thought Dannie.

Mihai wondered how it would be to be held by her as she was holding the harp.

“Good afternoon, domnuezuella,” both men said in perfect harmony.

“Good afternoon,” Chera said, and put a hand over her mouth. These two were both so handsome, she thought, and so different. The one with the strange white hair bore himself with such dignity, and with a certain sadness, too. His friend, on the other hand, was red-haired and blue-eyed, and wore the brightest smile she had ever seen.

She glanced from Dannie to Mihai, and then back again, and all of a sudden she felt something apart from her usual shyness at strangers.

“The way that you played that music,” Dannie said, “was masterful.”

“We thank you for it, domnuezuella,” Mihai added. “I’ve never heard better.”

“It was wonderful,” Dannie added, not to be outdone. “I’ve never heard that tune before, either.”

Mihai looked at him.

“I’ve been trying to interest my friend in this beautiful art for a long time,” he told Chera. “I’m glad he recognises how brilliant your recital was.”

Dannie barely paused before replying.

“Even a deaf man would have recognised your playing for the art that it was, domnuezuella,” he said.

“I made it up just now,” Chera said, surprising herself at her bravery in talking to these men. Work, or even combat was one thing, but romance...

She felt her cheeks burning, and raised her hands to cover her face.

“Really?” Dannie asked. “You created such beauty out of thin air?”

“It was wonderful,” Mihai added.

There was a moment of silence as the three of them tried to think of something else to say. Chera, remembering the magic that Maria had worked upon her, lowered her hands.

Mihai tried not to stare at her. Dannie sighed, and sought inspiration in the clouds. The small crowd that been clapping their performance a moment ago, looked on with fresh amusement.

“I would like to give you a gift,” Mihai said, at last thinking of something to say. “So that maybe you will play for us again.”

“What a good idea,” said Dannie.

Chera shook her head.

“I don’t mind playing for you again,” she said. “Strig-any are all one family. You don’t have to give me anything.”

“We must give you something in return,” Dannie said solemnly. “It is our way. Anyway, there must be something that you miss in this place.”

Chera looked past the wagons, and out into the drab heath beyond. The shadows of the clouds rolled across it, as black as night, but even where the sun shone there was no colour for it to catch amongst the mud and gorse, and withered grasses.

“I miss flowers,” she said.

“Then flowers,” Mihai said with a bow, “it shall be.”

Chera wriggled with embarrassment, clasping her harp. The two men watched the way that the curves beneath her shift moved, and the way that the pinkness of her flesh showed beneath the stretched white cloth. Both realised that they’d do anything but kill to be the first to return with their tribute.

Maybe they’d even do that.

“Might we ask your name, domnuezuella, so that we know for which beauty we are seeking the blooms?” Mihai asked.

“Her name,” said a voice from behind him, “is Chera, and my name is Malfi, Domnu Malfi. I am her father.”

Dannie and Mihai turned to find Malfi standing behind them. They saw the scowl on his face, the strength of his arms, and the cleaver that he wore at his belt. It was not a romantic sight.

“Good afternoon, domnu,” Mihai said.

“We wanted to see if you needed a hand with your section of the barricade,” Dannie added.

“How neighbourly. In fact, it does seem that our barricades aren’t yet strong enough to keep out the undesirables.”

“Well, that’s why we’re here,” Mihai said, pretending not to understand.

“Yes, you are still here, aren’t you?” Malfi said. He glared at the younger man, who shifted uncomfortably.

“We were just going,” Dannie told him, “unless you have anything that needs to be done?”

Malfi said nothing. Instead, he let his hand fall to the handle of his cleaver.

“Right, we’ll be off then,” said Dannie.

Mihai followed him to the edge of the encampment. Then he turned and smiled at Chera. She smiled back, before he turned back away, and, beneath her father’s glare, hurried off.

“Oh Father!” she said, stamping one foot down upon the running

board of her wagon.

“Don’t take that tone with me,” Malfi retorted. “I won’t have vagabonds wandering around our camp. And why don’t you go and put some more clothes on? You’ll catch a cold.”

With that, he turned, and stomped off to make sure that their barricade was completed by nightfall.

Chera watched him go, and, still scowling, put her harp away. It would have been nice to have been brought some flowers. It would have been nice to have seen those men again, but, now that her father had frightened them away, she knew that she’d never see either of them again. The next morning dawned cold and grey, the chill a promise of the winter that was on its way. A sleeting drizzle angled in from the east, and the mud into which Flintmar was sinking had already become ankle deep.

Mihai had risen with the dawn, and boiled a pot of water in the brass stove of his wagon. Boris and Bran woke up as the smell of burning charcoal and tea filled the wagon in which all three slept.

“So what are we doing today?” Bran asked, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. Mihai had opened the wagon’s rear door to let out the smoke and the steam. Boris took one look at the weather outside before making a suggestion.

“I say we make some crossbow bolts, or maybe,” he said, yawning and stretching comfortably within the cosy confines of the wagon, “we should just decide what we’ll say at council tonight. I hear the domnu will be elected as Kazarkhan. The one-eyed old tyrant will make a good one too, I reckon. Remember-”

“The bastards that tried to rob us after we left Lerenstein?” Bran finished for him, and grinned wickedly. “It was almost as if the domnu knew they were there. I bet they hadn’t taken such a beating as we gave them in their whole miserable lives.”

“The domnu used to be a mercenary didn’t he, Mihai?” Boris asked “Mihai?”

“What was that?” Mihai asked. He had been lost in his plans, as he had gazed into the rain, but now he poured the tea and passed the wooden bowls to his friends.

“Your father,” Bran told him, “he used to be a mercenary, didn’t he?”

Mihai grunted, and winced at the scalding heat of the tea. He was drinking it quickly, eager to be about his business.

“Yes, he was. That’s how he lost his eye.”

“So,” Bran began.

“Think he’ll be elected Kazarkhan?” Boris finished.

“If they’ve got any sense,” Mihai said. He nodded, and slurped down the rest of his tea. “After all, it isn’t a personality contest, so the

miserable old devil stands a good chance. Right, I'm off. See you tonight."

"Off?" asked Bran, who had been blowing on his tea.

"Off where?" Boris asked.

Mihai couldn't help it. He looked shiftily. The twins were suddenly alert.

"You don't have to tell us if you don't want to," Bran said.

"Because we'll find out anyway," Boris explained.

"Oh, it's nothing. I'm just going back to that forest we passed on the way here. I want to find some wood for making crossbow bolts with."

"Plenty of seasoned wood here," said Boris, reasonably.

"The best sort of ash, too," his brother nodded.

"Yes, well you can work on that, and I'll restock our supplies." Mihai smiled at his own invention. "Can't be running out of seasoned wood, even for crossbow bolts, and I saw a good few stands of ash in that forest."

"Looked more like oak to me," Boris said, frowning.

"Like you'd know oak from ash," Bran said, rolling his eyes.

"You'll know oak from ash from my fist if you don't shut up," Boris told him, conversationally.

"Going to use it to wipe your eyes with?" Bran asked from within the safety of his blankets.

"Idiot," Boris said, affectionately.

"Fool," Bran muttered, and drank his tea. "Hey, where's Mihai gone?"

"Must have grown tired of your arguing," Boris said, and dragged a sackcloth bundle down from its wicker shelf. He unrolled it to reveal a bundle of thick wooden shafts. Bran found the box of goose feathers, and started splitting them into fletch for the arrows Boris had started shaping with his knife.

"How much do you want to bet he's gone to collect ash from the forest?" he asked after a while.

Boris sniggered.

"Girl, you reckon?"

"No doubt about it. Not that I blame him. There's a whole caravan of seamstresses, apparently. Grigor was telling me. Imagine it, every single one of 'em for sale. Fat ones, skinny ones, old ones, young ones: you just go in and take your pick. If you've got the coin, of course."

Both men paused in their task, and looked wistfully out into the sodden settlement beyond.

"Let's get about making some coin, then," Bran said and, thus inspired, the twins got stuck into their morning's work. Mihai was

glad that he'd been able to slip away. For a moment, he'd considered going on foot, so that he would be able to slip around the pickets that blocked the road out of Flintmar. He'd dismissed the idea almost as soon as it had occurred, though. If his excuse was good enough for the twins, it would be good enough for the men on the barricade, and anyway, it was too far to walk.

He would need time to look around if he was going to find a nice enough bloom in this season.

It would have been nice to have brought the twins to help him, but he hadn't even considered that for a moment. There was no way, absolutely no way, that he was going to tell them that he was going to all this trouble to pick some flowers.

"This is ridiculous," he muttered to himself, as his horse trudged unhappily into the sheeting rain. Mihai's waxed cloak was already dripping, and it flapped up in the sudden gusts, so that his breeches were soon wet too.

Even as he said the words, he knew that they weren't true. Not going to fetch Chera her flowers, now that would have been ridiculous. She was, Mihai had decided, the most gorgeous woman he had ever seen, and he had seen a few. It was just that, somehow, the tavern girls and seamstresses that he had so cheerfully bedded, had never had anything like this effect on him.

It wasn't just that she was lovely, he considered, although she certainly was. Everything about her, from the curve of her hips to the tilt of her nose, was perfect. No, it was much more than that. Maybe it was something to do with the music.

For no good reason, he suddenly remembered the night in Lerenstein when he had sung the charm to quieten the guard dogs of the inn that they'd burgled. Then, the thought was gone, and his attention returned to the way that Chera's hair had gleamed in its braided tress, and the way that her shift had flushed pink where the thin material had been stretched across her chest.

Mihai was lost deep in a fantasy, in which he was heroically saving her from a band of marauding orcs, when he noticed that another rider was ahead of him on the road out of Flintmar. In the sheeting rain, it was impossible to see who it was, but Mihai spurred his horse on anyway, curiosity getting the better of him. As he drew nearer to the rider, curiosity gave way, first to suspicion, and then to dismay.

The rider wasn't wearing a hood, and his sodden white hair was recognisable anywhere.

"Dannie," Mihai said as he drew level with him.

"Oh," Dannie, who had been hunched against the rain, said, looking as dismayed to see his friend as his friend had been to see

him. "Mihai."

"What are you doing out in this filthy weather?" Mihai asked.

Dannie shrugged and looked away.

"You know that I am apprenticed to the petru," he said. "I spend my time on all sorts of tasks."

Mihai nodded sceptically.

"This task wouldn't be taking you to where those wolf roses were in flower back in those woods, would it?"

Dannie grinned. "My task might take me there, and where are you going in this filthy weather?"

"I thought that it would be a nice day to gather some staves from the forest," Mihai said, and wiped the sheen of rainwater off his face.

"What a coincidence," Dannie replied, his tone the driest thing in a hundred miles. "We might as well go together, then."

Mihai nodded. So, he wouldn't be the only one to bring Chera flowers. That was all right. He'd just have to make sure that the ones he brought were the best.

The barricade soon loomed up out of the downpour ahead of them, and a pair of miserable pickets strolled forward to wave them down. Although both men were swaddled in cloaks, the rain had made rats' tails of their beards, and they were shivering.

"Are you the relief?" one of them asked hopefully.

"No," Dannie said, "I am the apprentice of Petru Engel, from the caravan of Brock. My business is elsewhere."

"Damn," the picket said, making no attempt to hide his disappointment, "and who are you?"

"I'm looking after him," Mihai said.

"You'd better go through, then, but remember that you'll be outside of Flintmar, so you'll be outlaws until you return."

"We'll keep our wits about us," Dannie told him, and, with a final, disappointed glance down the road, the two pickets went to untie a section of the barricade so that the two men could pass.

"Right then," Mihai said when they were out of earshot, "shall we race to that clearing? It can't be more than a couple of miles away."

"In this weather? You're crazy."

Even so, when Mihai spurred his horse into a gallop, Dannie didn't hesitate to join him in his mad dash through the sheeting rain. "These aren't as nice as I remember," Mihai said as he plucked one of the dog roses from the bush. In the week since he had passed it, the petals had turned brown, as though singed, and, as well as being discoloured, they were also limp and wilted.

"It's a shame," Dannie agreed.

Both men had dismounted to search through the flowering bushes that grew in the clearing. The rain had given way to sunshine. The

forest floor was steaming and the wet autumn leaves gleamed as though freshly created. The water and sunlight had come too late to save the flowers, though. Their season had well and truly finished.

"I suppose that we could give her some flowers made out of wire and cloth. Hradic the tailor does that," Mihai suggested.

"Good idea," Dannie agreed. "I think that I'll stay here for a bit though, as it's stopped raining."

Mihai nodded.

"You're right. There are plenty of other places to look. What's that blue one called that grows in the autumn?"

"Blueskife," Dannie told him. "It's good for gout and rheumatism."

"How romantic," Mihai said, and Dannie snorted.

"Romantic or not, I don't know if it grows amongst oaks."

"Let's find out," Mihai said, and so, vaulting back up onto their horses, the two men rode slowly off into the depths of the forest. It was Dannie's mare who saved them. Although the rainstorm had long since dried up, the wind still blew strong enough to set the forest's branches crashing and rattling against each other in a constant, deafening rhythm. Although neither the Strigany nor their mounts could hear anything, apart from the steady roar of the wind in the trees, it didn't stop Dannie's mare from smelling the danger that lay ahead.

She stopped suddenly, and, when Dannie nudged her with her heels, she stubbornly refused to walk on. Instead, she shifted nervously from side to side, and whinnied a warning.

"What's up with her?" Mihai asked.

"Something," Dannie frowned. "Something ahead, something she doesn't like."

Both men turned to look along the deer path that they had been following. Apart from the constant flurries of falling brown leaves there was no movement. There was certainly no sign of any danger.

"Whatever it is, we should check it out," Mihai decided, eyes brightening with the promise of adventure.

Dannie's frown deepened. His mare was a stolid old thing, and it wasn't like her to jump at shadows. The last time she had been so nervous had been before the orcs had fallen upon them in the mountains, the day before he had found his caravan.

"All right," he said, not wanting to dwell on that particular memory. "Let's go, quietly though."

He whispered something soothing into his mare's twitching ears and stroked her neck, and, eventually, she consented to walk on down the path.

They had gone for no more than a hundred yards when both men

heard the first sounds of the danger ahead. There was a slow, drawn-out crash that sounded like a falling tree, an explosion of fleeing birds from the surrounding forest, and a chorus of wild voices.

Without exchanging a word, both of the Strigany slipped from their horses, and led them off the track. Mihai tied their reins around the branch of a tree, the slipknots perfect for a quick escape. Dannie, meanwhile, disappeared into the undergrowth.

He stooped down to crawl beneath the briars on his knuckles and knees. The detritus of the forest floor was cold and wet. It soaked through his breeches, and scraped his fists, as he made his way up to the top of the nearest hill. He paid no heed to the discomfort, though. As he moved through the tangled undergrowth, all of his senses were straining to make sense of the uproar ahead. At times, he wondered if it was an illusion, that perhaps he was imagining voices in the windblown forest, in the same way that he had once heard the sea in a conch shell.

Then he crested the ridge that marked the end of the forest proper, and, in the grasslands below, he saw that this was no illusion.

His eyes widened in disbelief at the sight below, and, for a moment, he froze. Then he slowly lowered himself on to his stomach, and, ignoring the things that wriggled below him, slithered forwards to gain a better view.

“Sigmar’s balls,” he whispered.

“You can say that again,” Dannie whispered back. He had crept up to lie beside his friend, and, although he knew that there was no need to whisper, or even to lower his voice, he whispered anyway.

The creatures they had found were maybe three hundred yards away, and even if the wind wracked forest hadn’t been so loud, the things would have been deafened by the noise they were making.

“What are they?” Mihai whispered, his voice even softer.

Dannie just shrugged. There was no doubt that the sound they had heard had indeed been that of a falling tree. A dozen of them lay on the pastureland below, scattered behind the creatures that had torn from the edge of the forest. Their branches were still clothed with the russet colours of autumn leaves, and their roots were still clogged with fresh soil.

Three hundred yards beyond the last of these splintered trunks a great canvas encampment sprawled out across the grass, a whole city of tents, shelters and bivouacs. The organised chaos of these disparate shelters were grouped into little islands, separated by muddy streets, and, in the centre of each of the hundred separate encampments, there fluttered a pennant, each of which was more garishly decorated than the last.

Some were topped with gilded carvings. Others with the skulls of

unrecognisable beasts, or great sprays of coloured feathers. One even had what seemed to be the remains of a man still locked into an iron cage. Men moved among the tents, as busily as ants in an upturned nest. They were tending cooking fires, sharpening weapons, smoking and gambling, and doing any one of the hundred other things that encamped soldiers do.

Dannie had no interest in the mysterious army, at least for now. He was interested in the things that were busily pulling the forest apart, as casually as children weeding a vegetable garden.

There were two of them, and they were massive. Despite the fact that they were slouched so low that their heads were held no higher than their shoulders, both stood as tall as the oaks they were felling. Apart from the shapeless loincloths, which they wore swaddled around them, they were naked, and, despite their terrifying stature, they looked scrawny and malnourished. Ribs as big as ships' staves showed through the grimy skin of their chests, and the bones of their joints could be seen white in their elbows and wrists.

Malnourished or not, there was no mistaking the sheer, blind power that the creatures wielded. The Strigany watched, as they clumsily tried to loop great cables around two more trees. Their piggy eyes narrowed in concentration as they did so, and their sloping foreheads were furrowed.

Threading a cable around a tree was obviously as mentally challenging for them as it was physically easy. One of them pulled the mess of knots it had made, and the whole lot came crashing free of the branches.

It roared with frustration, the cry booming through the forest with a bone-rattling depth. The noise seemed more like a force of nature than a voice.

Despite himself, Dannie felt his pulse accelerating in instinctive terror, and he pressed his body further into cover, as the creature stamped down with one bare foot. There was a crash of splintering timber from the wrecked mess that surrounded it, and a branch as long as a wagon was sent catapulting through the air.

Dannie watched its trajectory, and, for the first time, he noticed the crowd of men who were watching from the edge of the camp. They yelled with surprise as the piece of lumber spun towards them, and scattered as it thudded into the ground.

The creature, whose fit of pique had almost been the death of a dozen of them, paid no heed to their complaints. Its head cleared by the sudden violence, it had managed to loop the cable around the trunk. It looked ridiculously pleased with itself as it stood there, and, when the men's howls of protest gave way to a mocking cheer, it smiled and drooled with pleasure.

“So, these are what giants look like,” Dannie said. “As moronic as they are massive, it says in the lore.”

“Giants!” Mihai echoed.

Dannie turned and looked at him, one eyebrow raised.

Spurred on by its fellow’s success, the second giant had managed to secure its tree, too. It had wrapped the cable three times around it, and was struggling to remember what to do with the ends of the ropes. It looked to its fellow for inspiration. There wasn’t much there. Content with the job it had done so far, the first giant had lapsed into comatose contentment, its eyes vacant as it stared over some far horizon.

“Not the sharpest tools in the box, are they?” Mihai whispered as, fumbling all the while, the second giant finally remembered how to wrap the ropes around its wrists. The circlets of bruised skin that ringed them showed that it had done the same thing many times before. Even so, it took it a few attempts before it managed to wrap the sackcloth around its limbs.

Only then did the crowd of spectators part, and the giants’ handler, a man resplendent in an ankle-length leather jerkin, step forward. He held a great pewter cone in one hand, open at both ends, and a jug of something foamy in the other. He took a long swig of it before raising the loud hailer to his lips and speaking.

“Ungrol!” he bellowed. The sound of his voice was loud enough, even for the hidden Strigany to hear, and the first of the giants turned in response to its name. There was a wild cheer from the gathered men, as well as some booing. Ungrol looked vacantly towards them, and both the cheering and the booing stopped, so suddenly that they might have been cut off by a guillotine’s blade.

“Belnar!” the man bellowed, and the second giant looked around with a dazed expression. He too had his supporters and detractors among the gathering, and they risked another roar of cheers and catcalls.

“Get ready,” the man with the megaphone bellowed, raising his voice above the hubbub around him. Both giants turned back towards the oaks they had secured, looking surprised to find themselves attached to them. Ungrol raised his hands, and examined the ropes that he held as if he had never seen them before. Belnar just broke wind. It was a spectacular rip of sound that set the watching men howling with laughter.

“Pull!” roared their handler.

Nothing happened, and the crowd’s laughter degenerated into a storm of advice, most of it disgusting. The man with the loud hailer turned to them, and, waving the pewter cone around like a marshal’s baton, he cursed them into silence. Only then did he turn back to the

waiting giants.

“Pull!” he bellowed again. “Ungrol. Belnar, pull! Pull!”

Ungrol, inspired by some flash of wild genius, pulled hesitantly on his rope until he met some resistance. He paused, and then, with a sudden, deafening howl of irritation, he flung his weight back against the rope, and, shoulders bulging, started to pull on the oak.

For a moment, his fellow simply stood and stared at him, something that filled one half of the spectators with as much rage as it filled the other half with glee.

“Pull, Belnar!” the man in the great coat bellowed, sounding suddenly nervous as several enraged spectators started to close in on him, “pull!”

Whether it was the pleading tone in the handler’s voice, or the example of his fellow that did it, the giant did pull. He shifted, his bare feet pushing up great mounds of soil and turf as they slipped about, and he began to emit a deep, tidal growl of exertion.

Muscles bulged beneath the giants’ grimy skin, and the cloth mosaics of their loincloths slipped and shifted unnervingly as they strained against the stubborn resistance of the trees. The oaks, Dannie noticed, were at the prime of their lives. They must have stood for generations, weathering storms, fires and diseases, and they weren’t about to give up now.

The giants obviously lacked his philosophical nature. After only a few minutes, the resistance of the tree’s deeply buried roots, and the shouts of encouragement and scorn from the watching crowd, became too much for one of the giants. Its grunts of exertion grew in volume, until they were loud enough to drown out even the hundreds of voices of the spectators. Then its temper snapped. Abandoning the dubious benefits of technology, it dropped the cable, and charged the tree with a snarl that sounded like an avalanche. The ground thundered beneath its feet, and as its body crashed against the tree trunk. It seemed that it had won.

Although the oak bent back, it neither splintered nor broke. Instead, as the giant stood back, it sprang back up, and whipped its topmost branches across his face. The giant, outraged by the treachery of this attack, screamed with fury, and grabbed the tree trunk with fingers the size of hams. Its contorted features flushed bright red as it squeezed and shook the tree, apparently trying to strangle it.

“As massive as they are moronic, you say?” Mihai asked, raising his voice over the commotion.

“Almost,” Dannie said. Then he winced as the giant slipped. Its sliding feet threw up great gouts of mud and turf, and, tearing off the top of the tree, it crashed to the ground.

The Strigany could feel the impact of its collapse reverberating

through the ground beneath them. The tree, which the giant had been trying to strangle, sprang back up in ragged triumph.

The giant struggled to sit up, eyes blinking and mouth open with surprise. It looked at the tree, and then at its hands. Then its face screwed up, and, wrapping its arms around its knees, it leaned forwards, and started to howl.

"I don't believe it," Mihai said, as the giant rocked back and forth, "it's crying."

Dannie was about to disagree, when he saw the tears that were sheeting down its face.

"So much for the mighty and terrible creatures, descendants of the sky folk," he said.

Mihai sniggered. As the two watched, the second giant dropped his ropes and lurched over to where its fellow sat. It stood over him as he blubbered. Then it reached down, and, with a blow that would have crushed an ox, patted him on the head.

"Sympathetic fellow, isn't he?" Dannie asked.

"More than can be said of the crowd," Mihai replied. He was looking beyond the giants to the near riot that had broken out among the spectators. Fists had already been raised, and, whenever the weeping giant paused for breath, a storm of invective could be heard.

"Why do gamblers always take disappointment so badly?" Mihai wondered. "It's not as though they ever win."

"Not against us, perhaps," Dannie allowed, "but when they gamble among themselves some of them must win. That big fellow with the pink face and the drawn sword, for instance, I bet his luck's in more often than not."

"It's the one with the loud hailer I'm interested in," said Mihai.

"Not doing him much good now, is it?" Dannie said.

Nor was it. The mob's disappointment at the giants' lack of professionalism had found an immeasurably safer target in the form of their handler. He was backing away from a knot of angry men, his hands waving as he tried to reason with them. Eventually, he retreated behind his loud hailer and bellowed something about all bets being off.

It was a mistake. For a moment, the cries of outraged sportsmanship grew so loud that they could be heard above the fading sobs of the giant. The man in the leather coat, who was obviously no stranger to such controversy, made the right decision. He turned and ran towards the relative safety that could be found beneath his charges' mighty fists.

"Bet you a penny he makes it," Mihai said, as, leather coat billowing, the man sprinted away from his pursuers.

"No," Dannie said. "Look at that turn of speed. Anyway, look.

They're already dropping back."

"I reckon that's enough spying for one day."

Dannie and Mihai turned to ask what the other had meant. Then they looked behind them.

There stood half a dozen men. The black-tarred steel of their scale armour, and their well-oiled leather harnesses marked them out as soldiers. So did the stealth with which they had come upon the two Strigany, and the solid, unadorned crossbows that they were aiming at them.

"We were just going," said Mihai.

The soldiers' leader grinned, and stood back, as two of his men stepped forward to bind the Striganies' wrists.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Sometimes, opportunities are as fleeting as trout in a mountain stream, and to seize them you have to be as swift as a heron’s beak. Others are waiting, as clear and as solid as a seam of gold, for somebody stubborn enough to come along and claim them. The best opportunities of all are the ones that kick in your wagon door, stamp towards you with mud all over their boots, and won’t leave until you take them. All you need for opportunities like that is luck.”

– Petru Engel When it came, it was a short, one-sided fight. Dannie and Mihai had both played their parts perfectly. Their eyes had widened in fear as the guards approached, and they had allowed their weapons to be taken, and their hands to be bound, without any sort of struggle. When their captors had led them off, they had followed meekly, speaking only when it was necessary to cover the cracking of their wrists as they slipped their bonds. After that they said nothing until they were reunited with their captured horses.

It was Mihai who broke their silence, and when he did so, it was with a sudden, wild ululation that took everybody by surprise. Mihai’s guard jumped, swore, and then punched him in the chest.

“Shut up with that noise,” he snapped, but it was already too late.

As soon as the horses heard Mihai’s call, they reacted, violently and instinctively. Their ears flattened along their skulls, their eyes rolled in fear, and they reared up onto their hind legs, nostrils flared and hooves flashing as they vented their terror. They were not seeing men anymore. When they looked at the soldiers who milled around them, they saw the carnivorous forms of monsters, and instead of leather and human sweat, they smelled the mildewy stink of hungry orcs.

The soldiers cried out a warning as they stumbled back from the crazed horses, but, for one of them, the warning had come too late. He had been holding Dannie’s mare by the mane when Mihai had cried out, and she had lifted him clean off his feet as she had reared back. As he fell back down and turned to stumble away, one of her hooves caught him on the back of the neck. There was a wet snap, and he collapsed, his vertebrae shattered.

Although he was the first to die, he wasn’t alone for long. As the soldiers retreated from the horses in confusion, Dannie and Mihai sprang into action.

They were unarmed, but that hardly mattered. The distraction that their panicking horses provided was weapon enough, and within seconds they had both killed. Mihai had twisted his man’s head back with a sudden, lethal snap that the shepherds of the caravan used to

slaughter lambs. Dannie, meanwhile, had snatched a dagger from another soldier's belt and had then returned it to him, stabbing between the armour plates of his hauberk, and into the liver beneath. He twisted, and retrieved the blade along with a spray of blood, and the soldier screamed and collapsed onto the forest floor.

Before the other soldiers realised that the main threat was no longer the deadly blur of the horses' iron-shod hooves, it was already too late. Neither of the Strigany needed to be a marksman at this range, and, as soon as they had snapped the locks off of their victims' crossbows, they fired, the bolts thudding through flesh and bone to skewer two more soldiers.

The final man, the sergeant, saw his men falling on either side of him, crossbow bolts sprouting out of them. He looked through the windmilling hooves of the horses and saw the others that lay at the feet of their captives. Then he ran.

"Calm the horses," Dannie yelled at Mihai as he dodged past them to follow the fleeing soldier.

Mihai hesitated. Seeing that their mounts were already bleeding from self-inflicted wounds, he started singing another charm to still their terror. As the illusion he had inflicted upon them melted away, they quietened down, to stand, their chests billowing in and out, and their coats wet with blood and foam.

Meanwhile, Dannie was haring after his prey. The sergeant was weighed down by his harness, and unused to moving through the tangled confines of woodland. He was close to panic, too. When he looked back, his eyes were as wide as the horses' had been, and when Dannie grabbed him by the ankles, he cried out in terror.

The cry was cut off as the soldier landed on his face. Dannie, not wanting to take any chances, kicked him hard. While the soldier writhed in agony, Dannie put a knee on his neck, twisted his arms back, and bound his wrists, with the cord with which he himself had been tied.

"Now then," he said, smiling with a savage cheerfulness that wasn't all for show, "let me show you how to tie a knot. Then I'll show you how to ask questions, persuasively."

The sergeant just whimpered. "Domnu Rortchak," Domnu Brock said, getting up from his seat to grip the man's hand and pull him up into his wagon, "I am honoured that you have come."

Rortchak, a small, round, red-faced man, nodded politely. He swept off his hat and turned to close the wagon door behind him, on the rest of Flintmar, and, particularly, on the line of other domnus, who had been waiting outside Domnu Brock's wagon with him.

"How could I have refused an invitation from Domnu Brock?" he asked, "especially when everybody is speaking of the need for a

Kazarkhan.”

Brock smiled and waved Rortchak to a seat.

“There’s no doubt that we do need one,” he said. “Will you take a bowl of wine?”

“Delighted to,” Rortchak said, and sat down. For the first time, he noticed Petru Engel. The old man sat wrapped in his black robes, silent and unmoving in his shadowy corner.

“Petru,” Rortchak said, raising his bowl in a toast to the old man before he drank.

Engel just nodded.

“It was about the Kazarkhan that I invited you over,” Brock said. “The thing is, quite a few of the other domnus have suggested that I take the job. It’s no secret that I wasted my youth fighting other men’s wars for them. Might be time to put all that experience to good use, but I was just wondering what you thought?”

Rortchak grinned widely.

“I think that it’s a good idea,” he said, nodding. “In fact, I think that it’s such a good idea that you don’t even need to get your raven here to convince me.”

He looked across at Petru Engel and winked. The petru’s poker face creased into a wide, gap-toothed grin.

“How do you know I haven’t already?” he asked. Rortchak just shook his head.

“I’ve been married to our own petru for long enough to know when craft is being used,” he said, “and anyway, old Domnu Matchelek convinced me before he invited me over. Everybody respects you, Brock, and we all know that you know how to fight a war as well as a skirmish. Now, do you want me to get Domnu Chavek and Spurn to come over and have a chat too? They’re reasonable men.”

Brock smiled and nodded his thanks.

“I’d be honoured if you would, Rortchak, and I won’t forget it.”

“Don’t worry,” the fat man said, draining the last of his wine, and getting to his feet. “If you do forget, I’ll remind you.”

And, with a wink, he climbed back out of the wagon.

One of the domnu’s men helped him on his way, and then put his head through the door.

“It’s Domnu Greisar to see you next, domnu,” he said.

“Send him in,” Brock said, and went to help the man into his wagon. He would be the twenty-seventh that day, and they still had a good five hours left before the council.

“Domnu Greisar,” he repeated for the twenty-seventh time, “I am honoured that you have come.”

“I don’t mind coming,” Greisar said. He was a thin-lipped man,

immaculately dressed in embroidered cloth, and even more immaculate in his courtesy as he sat down, "but I might as well tell you, I think that all of this talk of Kazarkhans is unnecessary. We are a free people, and I can see no need to start bowing down to a war leader if we don't have a war."

"Have a bowl of wine," Brock said, nodding sympathetically as he handed a bowl over. "I was wondering the same thing myself. Without good cause, none of us want a Kazarkhan. It isn't our way. I was just wondering what you thought good cause might be."

"I suppose that it would be..." Greisar began, and then paused. He had been about to say something about finding an army arrayed against them, but all of a sudden he thought of an ambush they had suffered on the road: of the confusion, of the uncertainty, of the feeling of isolation that he suddenly seemed to remember feeling at the time.

They needed a Kazarkhan. Of that, he was suddenly, completely, certain.

"Well, I suppose that we should appoint somebody," he said vaguely. Then his eyes fastened on Brock. "You used to be a mercenary, didn't you?"

"A mercenary captain," Brock reminded him.

"Yes," Greisar agreed and then frowned, as if he had forgotten why he had come. "Yes, well you've got my vote, Kazarkhan Brock. Just don't let it go to your head."

"You have my word, domnu," Brock said, and bowed as Greisar left. When he was sure that the man had gone, he turned to the petru. "Was that you?"

"The thoughts were Greisar's own. I just helped him to put them together."

Brock barked with a humourless laugh.

"I bet you did," he said. "Anyway, let's see who's next. Viles," he called to the man who was guarding the wagon, "next one."

Instead of the guard, or one of the assembled domnus, the sound of voices rose in protest, and then surprise. Then there was the distinctive bray of Mihai's laughter.

Brock scowled.

"Gods curse it, what's he doing now? Annoying the customers, no doubt." He leapt to his feet and loped over to the wagon's door. "Was ever a son so much trouble, Engel?"

"Oh yes," the petru nodded, but Brock didn't hear. He had already swung outside to see what all the noise was about.

He saw, almost immediately. A line of domnus had been waiting behind his wagon, some of them holding the flagons or pastries that his people had pressed on them. The line had coalesced into a mob of

the Striganies' most respected leaders. Those at the back shouted questions, while those at the front stared at the man who lay in the mud at their feet.

He was pale, apart from where he was bruised, and dried blood marked his broken nose and tightly bound wrists. He wore the harness of a soldier, although his scabbard was empty and his helmet was gone.

Mihai and Dannie stood over the unfortunate captive, busily arguing with the man that Brock had put on the door to greet his guests.

"I know you have your orders, Viles," Dannie told him, "but this is important. You have to let us see him."

"And you have to wait in line," the man hissed back angrily. Even from behind him, Brock could see that his ears were red with embarrassment. He was a good lad, very respectful of his elders. If only, Brock thought, the same could be said of my own son.

"Would you question the hospitality of our caravan by pushing in front of your elders?" his guard asked.

"We wouldn't if we didn't have to," Mihai said, "but we do. Where do you think he came down from? The last rain shower?"

"He's right," Dannie said, his tone more conciliatory. "These men are wise enough to understand that the sapling of custom must bend before the gale of necessity."

"What's this?" Brock barked, stepping down from his wagon. "Why are you inconveniencing your elders, Mihai?"

"Sorry domnu," Mihai said, although he hardly sounded it. "It's just that we've captured a prisoner from an-"

"We've captured a prisoner," Dannie interrupted, and nudged his friend. "You should speak to him."

Brock looked from the terrified whites of the captive's eyes to the grey ranks of his assembled allies, his assembled potential allies. He made his decision.

"These men are more important than some damned spy!" he thundered, his brow furrowing in fake outrage. "Apologise at once."

The two younger men looked at their domnu, their faces identical masks of surprise. Then, as Dannie's cleared in understanding, Mihai's darkened in rage. Brock looked at him, willing him to understand.

Whether he understood or not, he at least followed Dannie's lead in turning to bow to the assembled dignitaries and mutter an apology.

"Very well," Brock said. "Now, if you gentlemen will accept my apologies, I will have a quick chat with this man." He gestured down towards the captive. "I am certainly interested to know what a soldier is doing in our lands, humble though they are."

"We would expect nothing else from a Kazarkhan," Domnu

Petrechek said, and his fellows nodded their approval. Brock bowed solemnly, but inside he was grinning. This couldn't have worked out better.

"Right then, hoist him up," he said, and the two younger men dragged their captive, none too gently, into the wagon. "My name is Viktor Marstein. I can't remember who my mother was. An old woman looked after me for a while. I don't remember much about her either: just the trembling of her blue-veined hands and the smell of cabbage; and the way that, one day, she sat down in the corner of our hovel, and started to rot. It was summer, and, at first, I didn't know what was wrong.

"After that, I found the barracks. I ate the crusts the soldiers left, and the dregs of their pottage. In return, I polished armour, and stitched uniforms, and chopped turnips and firewood. I was hungry all the time, and exhausted.

"Sometimes, the men would get drunk. When that happened, I'd risk their company. They got generous as well as violent, and I'd get as many pennies as bruises. I only had bones broken a couple of times, and they healed all right.

"When I was almost grown, one of the sergeants started to teach me how to fight. His name was Mullen. He is the one I remember on Geheimnisnacht, and I always give Morr something for his soul.

"Muller taught me how to fight with my hands and feet, and teeth. Then he gave me an old wooden training sword, and taught me how to use it. I still have it somewhere.

"Later, after I'd started to buy women instead of cakes with my coin, Muller let me start training with the company. Not long after that, he got the captain to sign me up, give me a uniform, and issue me with my first steel sword.

"It was the happiest day of my life, and this is the most miserable."

Viktor paused, realising with a rush of something like vertigo what he had just said. Some of it, he had never told anybody before, and yet, here he was, beaten and bound, and baring his soul to the cadaverous old man, who sat above him like a vulture.

"It isn't just the pain and humiliation of being taken captive that does it," Viktor continued, his tongue apparently operating under its own power. "It's the fact that I've been taken by a bunch of filthy Strigany. When I escape, I'll have to cut some of your throats, maybe bring back a couple of heads. If I don't, I'll never make captain."

He paused, horrified by what he had just said, but his interrogator didn't seem to mind. He just nodded his head, as though he agreed with every word that Viktor had said.

The soldier clenched his jaws, muscles bulging in his cheeks as he

tried not to look into the deep, dark void of this terrible old man's eyes.

"I'll say that a bunch of filthy Strigany spies fell upon me and the lads on sentry duty. I'll say I was unconscious in the woods for a while," he heard himself confiding.

"No need to mention being captured at all. That pig's bladder Blysedon would have me killed if he thought I'd been taken prisoner. Can't have you vicious animals getting away like rats from a burning barn, that's what he said. This has to be total annihilation. We get a penny a head, too."

Petru Engel's expression remained mild. The same could not be said for the other three in the wagon. Brock's jaws had clenched, Dannie had turned as white as his hair, and Mihai had opened the straight razor that he usually used for shaving.

The petru spared them a glance, making sure that none of them would do anything to break the hold he had on their captive.

"Blysedon's a murderous bastard, all right. Some of the stories would make your hair stand on end, even the stuff he did to decent Empire folk. I mean, it's not as though you Strigany will be a loss to anybody. Thieving scum, all of you. Although..."

Viktor trailed off, a troubled look on his face.

"I just wonder about the women and children, though. Do you think it's still bad luck to kill 'em if they're Strigany?"

Petru Engel didn't say anything. He merely sat and watched, as unblinking as a cobra who has cornered a rat. When he spoke, his voice was as soothing as a cool hand on a fevered brow, and even the other Strigany felt their worries melting away.

"Do you think Muller would say that it's lucky or not?" Engel said.

For once, Viktor said nothing. He just swallowed, and looked suddenly sick.

"I don't know," he eventually decided, "and I can't find out. He's dead."

"Dead isn't the same as silent," the petru told him, and his words began to follow a silent melody that even Viktor could almost hear. "In fact, Viktor, Muller is right here, right here inside me.

"He wants to tell you something.

"Wants you to look at him.

"Look into my eyes, Viktor.

"Look deeply.

"Can you see him?

"See him?"

And Viktor did. The sentry peered into the night, his halberd raised against the figure that came stumbling towards him. His pulse

quicken until he realised that, whoever this man was, he was no danger. He was already bloodied and bruised, and even in the torchlight the sentry could see the dark circles of exhaustion beneath his eyes. Then, with a sudden start, the sentry realised that he knew who the man was. "Viktor! Where in Sigmar's name have you been?"

"Ambushed," Viktor said, and lurched to a halt in front of the sentry. Two others had emerged from the shelter behind him, their halberds held low as they approached the ragged man, but the sentry waved them back.

"It's all right," he said, "I know him. He's Viktor Marstein, a sergeant with Captain Gruber's lot. Got to say, Viktor," he said, turning back to the exhausted man, "you look awful. Where is the rest of your patrol?"

"Dead," Viktor said simply, and a shudder ran through him. "I have to talk to Blysedén."

"That madman?" the sentry asked, doubtfully. "Sure you don't want to tell your boss first? Let him bring the bad news."

"No," Viktor said, shaking his head emphatically, "it won't wait. Take me to him."

"All right," the sentry said, and he frowned as he saw how glazed the man's eyes were. "Sure you don't want a drink first?"

"Take me to Blysedén," Marstein repeated.

There was something in the tone of his voice that the sentry didn't like, although he couldn't quite decide what it was. Not that it mattered. Considering what this battered survivor had been through, his tone of voice was hardly a big deal.

"So, was it the Strigany?" the sentry asked, as he led Viktor towards their commander's tent. At the mention of the word, Viktor shuddered again, and his teeth started chattering.

"It's all right," the sentry told him, and grabbed his shoulder. "You're safe now."

Viktor turned to look at him with a blank stare. If the sentry hadn't liked the way that Viktor spoke, he liked that blank stare even less. He removed his hand from his shoulder and turned his attention back to the way ahead.

Blysedén's tent was a massive circle of thick canvas and timber frame. A stockade had been built around it, and a pair of ogres stood at the entrance, the two creatures as still and silent as the wooden stakes of the fence.

"We want to see the boss," the sentry told them.

"No visitors," one of the ogres rumbled, not deigning to look down.

"One of our patrols has been ambushed. The survivor wants to make a report."

“Make a report,” the ogre suggested.

“Only to Blysedden,” Viktor said, his voice barely audible after the ogre’s baritone rumble. “It’s about the Strigany.”

The ogres exchanged a single glance. Then one of them bellowed, so suddenly that the sentry jumped.

“Blysedden,” it called, loud enough to be heard on the other side of the camp.

A moment later, Blysedden’s clerk, Tubs, appeared from the depths of the tent. The privations of camp life, and the anxiety of dealing with the mercenaries, had melted the fat from him, and he looked like a man who had stolen a suit of skin that was two sizes too big. When he emerged from the safety of his master’s tent, it was as reluctantly as a mole emerging from its burrow.

“What is it?” he asked, glancing nervously up at the ogres, and preparing to run.

“This man claims to bring news of the Strigany,” one of them rumbled with perfect disinterest.

“Sergeant Viktor Marstein,” Marstein said, and snapped off a salute. The clerk, obviously taken with the novelty of being saluted, straightened his back.

“Ah yes. Heard about your disappearance. Well, glad you made it back. What did you want to report?”

“For Blysedden’s ears only,” Viktor told him.

“Oh, all right then. The commander is still awake. Come on. You can wait here,” he told the sentry as he made to follow him in.

“Good luck, Viktor,” he said as his colleague entered the tent.

Viktor, however, didn’t hear him. As he ducked through the canvas curtain into the oil-lit expanse of his commander’s quarters, he was already calculating, evaluating, searching.

The tent was empty, apart from a scrum of men who stood around the cartographer’s table in the centre. A large oil lamp hung above them, illuminating the freshly-inked canvas of the map, and gleaming on the brass angles of the cartographer’s compasses that rested on a side table. As the clerk cleared his throat nervously, the assembled commanders, obviously interrupted in the middle of their conference, turned to face him. In the midst of them all, his expression as bland as always, stood Blysedden.

“Why have we been interrupted?” he asked the clerk.

“This man escaped from a Strigany ambush,” the clerk squeaked, and pushed Viktor forward as though he were a human shield.

“A Strigany ambush? Damn!”

Blysedden scowled, and pushed past his colleagues towards the battered sergeant. He wore his usual broadcloth tunic, and, apart from the cutlass he wore at his belt, he might have been a clerk in a

counting house. The commanders who surrounded him, each one decked out in the very height of colourful martial fashion, made him look like a crow amongst a flock of peacocks.

“Where were you attacked?” he asked, seizing Viktor by the arm and dragging him over to the table. “They must have found out about our presence. Heads will roll for that, I can assure you.”

The commanders who surrounded him looked suddenly uneasy. Blysedén’s punishments were fast becoming a legend amongst his subordinates. The man had a real flair for creative misery.

“I’ll show you where I was ambushed,” Viktor said, and went forward to stand over the map table. The canvas that lay upon it had obviously been freshly made. The colours all stood out cleanly against the cream of the parchment, and the material was unblemished by age or staining.

“It was over there,” Viktor said, pointing at the opposite end of the table, and, as everybody turned to look, he snatched up one of the cartographer’s compasses and hurled himself at Blysedén.

The speed and ferocity of his attack would have been the end of most men, but not Blysedén. Despite his stocky build, he reacted with the whiplash reflexes of a cornered rat, twisting out of the way as the brass point of the compass punched through the air where his stomach had been. Viktor twisted and struck again, aiming for the soft spot just below his commander’s ribs.

Blysedén wriggled behind one of his captains and pushed the man forward to meet the thrust of the attack. The mercenary, who had barely realised what was going on, took the full force of the blow, and the brass spike of the compass punctured his skin, muscle and entrails. He screamed, more with surprise than pain. Then he screamed again, as Viktor pulled his makeshift weapon out of the sucking wound and leapt over his accidental victim’s collapsing body.

The room was in uproar. The assembled captains began drawing their sabres, but both the assassin and his target ignored them. Blysedén, with an impressive turn of speed, had already jinked around the table and was heading for the door, calling for the ogres who waited outside.

Viktor was hot on his heels. He dodged one sword stroke, and dashed another one away with the compass. A third caught him on his back, unzipping the muscles beneath his shoulders in a spray of blood.

He didn’t feel a thing, not even the warmth that trickled down his back. All he cared about was his quarry, and, to his rage, he saw that his target had already made it to the door. In another second, he would be outside, escaped, gone.

Viktor acted with an instinct that betrayed every principle he had ever been taught. He tested the weight of the brass compass, drew

back his arm, and threw it towards the broad target of his commander's back.

The makeshift weapon whirled as it spun through the air, the brass of its construction glittering like some hellish wasp. Then, with a meaty thunk that was the most satisfying thing Viktor had ever heard, it buried itself in the meat of Blysedden's shoulder.

The commander screamed, and spun around, lashing out at the assailant he had assumed was already behind him. It was all the Viktor needed. With a feral snarl that was more animal than human, he leapt forward, fingers outstretched in an attempt to grab his commander's throat.

Even wounded, however, Blysedden's reflexes didn't let him down. He ducked down beneath his assailant's wild charge, and, striking with the neat efficiency of a butcher quartering a pig, he hacked the cutlass blade up. The force of the blow combined with the momentum of his assailant's charge and Viktor's sternum was shattered in two, chips of bone driven back to puncture his heart.

The assassin dropped on top of Blysedden, and his dead weight threw both of them to the floor.

For a moment, Blysedden saw the dull sheen that had covered his assailant's eyes clear, and a look of almost comical surprise crossed his face. Then it was gone, and even wounded and on fire with adrenaline, Blysedden winced at the stink of the man's last, tidal breath.

He rolled out from under the body and saw the ring of horrified faces above him.

"It seems that the Strigany do indeed know that we're here," he wheezed, and he got painfully to his feet. With a sickening lurch of nausea, he realised that he could still feel the weight of a weapon hanging from the numbness of his shoulder. He reached back, and pulled the compass free. The bloodstained brass glittered in the light as he walked purposefully back to the table.

"Well, gentlemen, we obviously need to bring our plans forward. No matter. As we agreed, then, Captain Liebhert will place his archers here. You see, Liebhert, how you can approach the position without being spotted?"

Blysedden indicated a hollow on the map with the tip of the compass. A drop of his blood dripped onto the map, landing on the circle that marked the township of Flintmar.

It was, all concerned were later to agree, a good omen.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Old Mourkain was a land of honey and milk
The pigs lived in houses, the peasants wore silk
The land was so rich it bore three crops a year
And there was nothing but joy from cradle to bier.
Our lords were as fair as our land was fine
As wise as our petru and as strong as our kine
Their beautiful lives were of such elegant grace
That all clambered out for the joy of their embrace.”

– From The Song of Mourkain Not a day went by without Seneschal Martmann thanking the good fortune that had brought him to this posting. He was realistic enough to admit that he had done nothing to deserve it, any more than he had done anything to deserve becoming a seneschal in the first place. Being born to one of the old baron’s maidservants had been enough. That, and the striking resemblance Martmann had born to the lecherous nobleman.

Other, more ambitious men, might not have found this small border fortress to their liking. It was little more than a fortified manor: two storeys for the men, a slate roof, and a wood-built corral for their horses.

It had been built to guard the pastures and low hills that lay to the west of the new baron’s demesne, and apart from grass and sheep, and weather, there was nothing much there: no trade routes, thick with fat merchants and bulging purses; and no local town from which to squeeze the gold and the girls. There wasn’t even any decent hunting. The shepherds and cattlemen who inhabited the area had long since killed most of the game.

No, this posting would not have been for everybody, but for a man of Martmann’s temperament, it was ideal. He was seldom one for exerting himself, and never one for facing the kind of dangers that other, more lucrative postings, offered.

Occasionally, he and his men would make a show of chasing goblins back into the forested hills beyond. Not much of a show, though, and none at all if the goblins ever stopped running. Then there had been the recent proclamation from the baron about the Strigany, just in time for Martmann and his men to seize an entire caravan. It had been the most heroic action of his military career. The caravan had been small, but wealthy, and Martmann, deciding that its presence was another sign of fortune’s favour, had stripped it like a vulture before burning it to the ground. After all, he liked to think that he was a far-sighted man, and he especially liked to think that nobody was going to be left alive to start thinking about revenge.

Yes, life was good. It was in celebration of this fact that tonight, as on every night, Martmann was drunk. He sat at the head of the table in the hall of his small fortress, as perfectly at home as a frog on a lily. The reed torches lent a warmth to the cold granite walls, and to the rough-hewn features of the rabble he commanded. There were a score of them, a motley crew of troopers who nobody else had wanted, and they had just finished feasting. Now, replete, they concentrated on their jugs of ale, leaving the old women who ran the kitchen to bustle and argue their way around the table as they cleared it.

Martmann yawned contentedly as he surveyed his domain, took another swig of ale, and then produced a knife and the piece of wood he was working on. It had once been a baton, he thought. He had found it in the burnt-out remains of the caravan that he and his men had looted a while back, and he often wiled away the hours by engraving scenes from the tale of Sigmar Heldenhammer onto it.

Meanwhile, his sergeant, whose only similarity to his seneschal was his love of ale, belched, wiped the back of his hand across his moustache, and regarded his master with the appraising eye of a peasant choosing a hen to slaughter.

"Fancy a game of stones, sire?" he asked, trying not to sound too eager. By his calculation, his superiority at the game meant that he ended up making about twice as much as his commander. He reckoned he had about three more months to go until he had won enough to buy a farm. That was, as long as he could keep Martmann interested in the game.

"Not tonight," Martmann said. "I think I'll just do a spot of carving then turn in."

The sergeant hid his irritation. There were, after all, other fish to fry. None of them had the seneschal's pay, though, or his overconfidence.

"Ah, c'mon, boss," the sergeant said, hiding the steel trap of his greed beneath his impression of beery good nature. "The lads don't have your skill. Anyway, I want to try to win back some of my money from you."

Martmann, whose idleness didn't quite extend to not counting the coins in his purse, smiled wryly.

"I'm sure you'll have plenty of time for that, sergeant. Anyway, I want to finish this bit. See here?" he said, thrusting the piece of carved wood under the sergeant's nose, "that's Sigmar's first meeting with the dwarfs."

"It's good," the sergeant said. It was, too. The figures were simple, but no less realistic for that. In the flickering torchlight, they almost seemed alive, moving with the shadows that danced around the hall.

The seneschal had real skill, and, for the thousandth time, the sergeant wondered if Martmann really was the old baron's bastard.

Well, he's a lucky swine either way, the sergeant thought. Just as well I don't have to rely on luck to fleece him.

What he said was, "When you're finished carving that, what are you going to do with it seneschal? It would make a fine souvenir of our service. I've certainly learnt a lot from being under your command."

Martmann shrugged.

"I'm not sure, really. I might have it blessed at the Sigmarite shrine in Stein. I might even sell it as a Strigany stick to some merchant who has to deal with the rascals. The material's appropriate enough, isn't it?"

Martmann winked and the sergeant forced himself to laugh, despite his disappointment. He had had the same idea himself. He was about to suggest playing stones one last time, when, from outside the hall, the horses started to scream.

It was a piercing sound, and so horribly human that everyone in the hall fell immediately silent: the servants chattering, the drunks bantering, the man who had been playing the piccolo, and the one who had been about to deliver the punch line to his story. They all stopped, frozen, so that, apart from the cries of animal terror outside, the only sound in the hall was the splutter of the reed torches that lined the walls.

All eyes turned to Martmann, who cursed inwardly. Despite the ale in his belly, the hairs on the back of his neck had risen like the scruff of a frightened dog. Having studiously avoided battle, he had never heard the horses make such noises before, and the sound of their screaming had a nightmare quality to it that he didn't like at all. He licked his lips, and shifted. Then he turned to the sergeant.

"Sounds like there might be a wolf pack out there," he said, trying to sound casual. He failed. "Take a couple of the lads and go and make sure that they can't get into the corral, would you?"

"Yes sire," the sergeant said, inwardly cursing his master. For a moment, he thought about delegating too, sending out Greis, perhaps. Then he dismissed the idea, annoyed with himself. He was the sergeant, after all. He had to be able to command the men's respect.

"Who's on the first night watch?" he asked as he got to his feet and checked that his sword was secure in his scabbard. "You five? Good. Grab some crossbows. We'll see if we can't bag a couple of wolves. Well, hurry up then!"

As the five men rushed to the far wall, upon which the company's weapons were hung, the sergeant strode over to one of the few slit windows that looked out over the corral. He opened the shutter and

peered out into the night.

There was nothing but darkness, as black and unbroken as the spaces between the stars. That, and the screaming of the horses. Although the noise was as loud as ever, the sergeant thought that fewer of the animals were crying out. He scowled and turned away from the window, suddenly furious. He told himself that he was furious at the damned wolves, although only because he didn't want to admit the peasant superstition that bubbled beneath his thoughts like some debilitating hereditary illness.

He hadn't fought his way out of serfdom to fall for that nonsense now.

"Come on," he told his men as they formed up behind him. Although they were armed, none of them wore any armour. There was no time for that, the sergeant decided. The longer they waited, the more horses they would lose, and the more time he would have to think.

"Right," he told them, "grab a torch and follow me."

With a gesture towards his seneschal, which might have been a salute, the sergeant led his men down the stairs to the ground floor, opened the iron-bound door, and strode out into the night. The door banged shut behind him, although not before a draft of chill air rushed into the hall to set the remaining torches dancing.

Martmann watched the flames flicker and shifted uneasily on his chair. He caught somebody's eye, and fought down a sudden feeling of irrational guilt. After all, why should he have gone and seen to the horses? Wolves were nothing for a man of his rank to waste time dealing with.

If they were wolves, of course.

From outside, he could hear the sound of the sergeant's barked orders over the noise the horses were making.

"You," Martmann said, gesturing to the man who had been looking at him, "go and close those shutters. No point letting mosquitoes in."

"Yes, sire," the man said, and, exchanging a blank look with one of his comrades, he got up and went over to the open window. He peered out into the night. Seeing nothing, he swung the shutters closed. Almost as an afterthought, he dropped the latch, locking out whatever waited in the darkness outside.

Martmann returned to whittling at his piece of bone. Gradually, the noise of screaming horses died away. For a while, a single animal carried on, and then it stopped too, as suddenly as it had started.

Martmann sighed with relief. That sergeant was a good enough fellow, even if he did cheat at stones. He looked around, and saw that the rest of his men had relaxed, too. One of them picked up his

piccolo, and, as if trying to wash the memory of the horses' screams from his comrades' ears, he began to play. There was some chatter and a burst of relieved laughter. From the kitchen there came the smash of a dropped pot, and a chorus of voices raised in mutual recrimination.

Then, from the silence of the night beyond, a single, terrified shriek.

The assembled men looked at each other. Then, once more, all eyes turned to Martmann. He cursed inwardly. All he wanted was a quiet life. Was that really too much to ask?

"The sergeant must have had to put down one of the horses," he said.

Nobody believed him. He could see that in their eyes, in their postures, in the way that they were resting hands on the hilts of their swords. He didn't care. The ale he had drunk had suddenly turned sour in his stomach, and his armpits had become damp with sweat. Anyway, he was tired. It had been a long day. As soon as the sergeant came back, he would turn in.

He looked down at the piece of wood in his hands, and started carving the branch of one of the trees that overhung Sigmar's head. The sweat on his palms made it difficult to grip, though, and, as he turned the wood, it slid through his fingers, and he cut himself with the knife.

"Damn the thing!" he swore, and banged it down onto the table. He looked around at the silent gathering and swore again. Why did they all look at him like that?

"You," he snapped. "You with the piccolo, play something for us."

The man played, reluctantly, badly. Martmann sucked the blood from his injured thumb, and shifted in his seat. What the hell was taking the sergeant so long?

After another fifteen minutes, some of his men were muttering the same question. Martmann watched them, but they were all studiously avoiding his eye. He chose one at random.

"You there," he said, pointing to one of his men, who hadn't bitten his tongue in time, "what's that you were saying?"

The trooper, suddenly aware of where his master's interest might be leading, swallowed and tried to look innocent. He failed. His was not an innocent face, which was one of the reasons he had ended up in this miserable posting.

"Oh, nothing really, sire," he said, and looked at his companions for support. They drew away from him, edging along the table on each side. Feeling as though he was about to be hit by lightning, the soldier shrugged and tried to smile.

"Nothing?" Martmann asked. Having selected his volunteer, he

was damned if he was going to let him wriggle out of doing his duty. "I thought you said something about the sergeant? Doesn't do to talk about a man behind his back, you know."

"I was just wondering how... how long the sergeant will be."

"Good question," Martmann said, smiling the smile of a gambler who has just forced an ace. "In fact, why don't you pop outside and find out? Better take a torch with you, too."

"Yes, sire," the man said dismally. "Oh, shall I take my section with me, too? The sergeant might be able to use us."

"Of course," Martmann said, nodding.

The volunteer's companions gave him a murderous look, and then all five got to their feet. Without a word, they marched over to the wall upon which their armaments hung. Unlike the first party, they took their time, strapping on plate armour, sliding into mail and fastening helmets. Martmann nodded to them as they clinked to the end of the hall, saluted, and then disappeared down the steps.

The door boomed as it opened and then closed, and they were gone.

Martmann waited. The remaining ten men waited. In the kitchen, the servants waited, too, until Martmann bellowed for them to bring in more ale. When it arrived, he and his men drank quickly, but silently, their ears straining all the while to catch any sound of what was happening outside.

They listened in vain. There were no screams, and no cries for help. There was nothing but the slow, soothing breath of the wind over the grassland, and the sputters of the torches within the keep.

After half an hour, the seneschal finished another pot of ale, and leaned over to the nearest of his men.

"You," he said, "go and make sure the bar is drawn across the door."

Before the man could obey, one of his comrades intervened. He was the oldest man in the company, one of the oldest men in the baron's employ, even. His white whiskers and his rheumatism had earned him this posting, and after a lifetime of struggle, he had welcomed the peace of it as much as Martmann had. Still, the old soldier had lived long enough to know that pretending to be deaf was no way to lead a quiet life.

"Sire," he said, turning to the seneschal, "don't you think it strange that our comrades have disappeared?"

"They haven't disappeared," Martmann snapped. "They're just... tardy."

The old soldier, however, wasn't about to be put off so easily.

"The sergeant went an hour ago. Why hasn't he returned? Why haven't the men you sent to find out what he was doing returned?"

Martmann fidgeted with his carving, and, even though he was looking down, he could feel the eyes of the entire company on him. This all really was too tiring. Why should he care if his soldiers wanted to wander around in the dark?

"I don't know," he admitted, and then decided to play his trump card, "but if you're so interested, feel free to go and find out."

"Never divide your forces," the old soldier said, with the monotone voice of a child who has learned his lessons by rote, "that's what the old baron said."

"Did he?" Martmann asked, nastily. He swore and got to his feet. "All this trouble over a few lousy wolves. Well, all right. I suppose we should go and hurry them up, but it really is too bad."

Another shriek of pain came from outside. This time there was no mistaking its humanity. In amongst the sheer, hysterical terror of the sound there were words, although Martmann couldn't understand what they were.

"Probably an animal," he said vaguely. Then, seeing the expressions on his men's faces, he realised that there was nothing for it. He was going to have to face the truth.

Damn.

"Right, all right then. I suppose we should be on the safe side. Sieggi! Karl! Get down and make sure that the front door's secure. I mean, barricade it, and don't open it for anyone."

"What about-"

"Just do it!" Martmann screamed. He put his fingers to his temples, and took a deep breath before continuing.

"Gerhardt, get your men armoured. Quickly! You, what's your name? Right, go to the kitchen and tell the servants to arm themselves: kitchen knives, meat hammers, whatever. The rest of you, get to the windows and try to see what the hell is going on."

The hall exploded into activity, and the old man followed Martmann as he went to retrieve his armour.

"Sire, I have no doubt that we are under attack," he said. "I remember when I was with the old baron in Geimshein. We were surrounded, and the enemy tried to shake our nerve by torturing prisoners."

"Did it work?" Martmann asked as he buckled his breastplate on.

"No. We decided to fight to the death rather than risk the same fate."

"Well, that is a cheerful tale," Martmann muttered. He selected a four-pointed mace from the wall, pushed the carving he had been holding into his belt, and strode over to peer out of the nearest window. He might as well have been looking at a black-painted wall.

"I can't see anything," he said, and, with the vague hope that that

might settle the matter, he bolted the window, and wandered back over to the table and his pot of ale. This was ridiculous. Why should he have to worry about the foolishness of his men? They should have stayed inside, or been more careful. For Sigmar's sake, they were supposed to be professionals.

The old trooper had been following his seneschal. He had seen better commanders than this one collapse into indecision, and he was damned if he was going to let it happen here. He was old, but he wasn't ready to give up living yet.

"Sire," he said, "we can either go out to offer help to our comrades, or we can secure the fortress. Which shall it be?"

"We have secured the fortress," Martmann snapped.

"You don't think that we should."

"No!" This time the seneschal shouted, and all eyes turned to him. He took a deep breath, and tried to ignore the pounding in his temples. "No. Just go and stand by that window, would you? I want to think."

The old trooper saluted again and marched off, muttering.

Let him mutter, Martmann thought, running a hand through his hair as he cast his eyes around his men. They were sullen and frightened, like cattle penned in a slaughterhouse. He supposed that he should have offered them some words of encouragement or a rousing speech. He rejected the idea. Why bother? He had given them the chance to stay safely inside instead.

Still, it would be nice to know what was out there: orcs, maybe, except that the only direction orcs could have come from would have taken them through the town of Biltong. So maybe it was bandits, but why should bandits attack the outpost? It wasn't as though Martmann had ever been any trouble to them, quite the opposite. He'd even done a bit of quiet business with them from time to time.

The seneschal felt the unfamiliar weight of the mace in his hand, and flexed his shoulders within the restrictive harness of his armour. Then he started to pace around the hall while he tried to think.

He had completed the first circuit when the torches started to go out.

Martmann saw the first one as it died. One minute the flame was burning as bright and as steadily as the noon day sun, the next it was choking and spluttering, finally dying altogether in a puff of black smoke. The shadows that lay beneath the table and between the men grew. They seemed to be creeping towards Martmann, and he swallowed nervously.

"You," Martmann snapped at one of the men, "get that thing lit."

"Yes, sire," the man said, nodding. He lifted the torch from the bracket beside him, and went to light the other one.

As he tried to light the torch another one went out on the other side of the hall, and then another. Then three blinked out in rapid succession, one after the other, casting the room into near darkness. The men shifted uneasily, their eyes growing wide and white in the gloom. Somebody dropped a cleaver and one of the serving staff screamed.

“Hold your positions,” Martmann barked, embarrassed that he too had almost screamed. His pulse was pounding and he cursed the sergeant for abandoning him. “You there, you from the kitchens, go and get some more torches from below, and you,” he said, turning to the man who was still trying to light the torch, “what’s wrong with you man? Get that thing lit for Sigmar’s sake.”

“It won’t light,” the man whined. Martmann was horrified, as much by the tone in the man’s voice as by his inability to light the torch. He knew that this villain was a veteran of both battle and gaol, but he sounded like a frightened child.

“Here, give it to me,” Martmann said, striding over to him, and grabbing the torch. As soon as his fingers touched the wood, the flame flickered and then died. Seneschal and soldier looked at each other over the smoking bundle, their eyes bright with unspoken tenors.

“There must be a draught,” Martmann said, even though he knew that he was sweating in air that was as cold and as still as that in a tomb.

“Why are all the torches going out?” one of the kitchen staff whined, and suddenly they were all talking, wailing and crying.

“Silence!” Martmann snapped, striding over to them, and waving his mace threateningly. “It’s just a draught, damn you, a draught! It’s nothing.”

Perhaps it was the terror that they saw in Martmann’s eyes, but the kitchen staff were not to be so easily consoled. Those nearest to him shrank away, but the others ignored him. Their sobbing echoed around the hall, half-lit in the dying light of the last few torches.

They didn’t stop until the knocking started. It was a steady, metronome beat, and it boomed on the door, and through the hall like some terrible pulse. Martmann felt a ridiculous urge to hide beneath the table. He dismissed it and turned to his men, but there was no inspiration to be found in their pinched and shadowed faces, only fear and confusion.

The knocking continued. Martmann swung his mace nervously. He forced himself to walk across the hall, which he had never before realised was so big, and down the steps that led to the lower hall and the door.

Four men were cowering down there, their eyes fastened to the iron-bound oak of the door. It was latched, Martmann was relieved to

see, and barricaded with some of the barrels from the store room. Meanwhile, great bundles of torches fizzled and spat. The men had obviously helped themselves to the stores.

“Who is it?” Martmann asked, his voice no more than a squeak. He cleared his throat and tried again, “Is that you, sergeant?”

The knocking continued as steadily as ever, and Martmann wondered how long it would be before the wood started to splinter. Even to his terrified ear, it sounded more like a fist than a battering ram, but if the rhythm carried on, then eventually... he suddenly felt like throwing up.

“Sergeant?” he asked again, swallowing and drawing closer to the door. “Is that you?”

Despite the pleading in his voice there was no reply from outside the door, but, even if there had been, Martmann would have been unable to hear it beneath the sudden terrible cacophony that had broken out upstairs.

The screams of the women merged with the terrified calls of his men, and Martmann heard a series of garbled warnings, followed by the shattering crash of falling roof tiles, and a single, high-pitched shriek.

Frozen at the bottom of the stairs that led up to the hall, Martmann felt his bladder release, and warmth flow down his legs. He had no idea what could have broken into his fortress, but there was no doubt that something had entered. Even in the fizzling torchlight, he could see the cloud of masonry dust that came rolling down the stairs.

For the first time, he could hear the voices of his enemy, too. They were as shrill as those of the kitchen servants, and as sharp as claws dragged across slate. They were joyful, too, although with a horrible twisted joy that was the perfect counterpoint to their victims’ cries of terror and desperation.

Suddenly, two figures emerged from the darkness at the top of the stairs. He whimpered with terror, before realising that they were two of his own men. The steel of their armour was as dark with blood as the pallor of their faces, although their master was in no mood to show any mercy on that account.

“Hold your ground,” he squeaked, waving vaguely towards them with his mace.

The two men stopped, and, for a moment, the seneschal thought that it was because of his orders. Then, they disappeared upwards, impossibly upwards, flying up above the lintel of the door as though they were two hooked fish being dragged from a pond.

Even above the din of the slaughter that was already taking place, Martmann could hear the slavering, slobbering sound of the men’s doom. He watched, fascinated, as blood started to rain down onto the

stairs. It pooled and ran, a single trickle of it making its way down the stone steps towards him relentlessly.

He stared at it, unable to move, until, behind him, he heard the sound of the door being unbolted.

“What are you doing?” he asked, wild-eyed with terror.

“We’re deserting,” one of the men said. “This isn’t a fortress anymore. It’s a trap, a rat trap.” Even as he worked, he began to cackle hysterically, tears running down his unshaven cheeks.

“You’ll come with us if you have any sense,” one of his comrades said as he rolled the last of the barrels away.

Martmann dithered. Already, the noises of the brief battle from above were dying down. The noises that replaced them were worse, so much worse. They were the sounds of feasting. He could hear the silky slap of tearing flesh, and a constant slurping sound, as though a dozen dogs were licking spilt milk off the stone floor.

“Hurry up then,” he said, suddenly whispering. He edged further back from the staircase, not wanting to see what might come down from above, but not daring to look away either. The glow of light from the few remaining torches was enough to send distorted shadows dancing across the piece of wall that he could see at the top of the stairs.

Whatever they were, they were not reassuring.

The door squeaked open behind him. Martmann turned, just as something loomed up at the top of the stairs. He didn’t stay to see what it was. Instead, he turned to follow the fleeing men out into the night, elbowing his way past the last of them, and haring out of the fortress that he had sworn to defend.

He blinked, and suddenly the darkness around him seemed alive with pale grey shapes. There was a cry of warning, a sudden scream, and then an explosion of pain on the back of his head.

The seneschal collapsed, almost willingly into a deep, dark oblivion. Martmann awoke with one of the worst hangovers he had had for a long time. His head throbbed in time with the beating of his heart, and his mouth felt like an orc’s toilet.

He groaned and, as he sat up, he realised that he had fallen asleep on the table. His eyes flickered open, and then flickered back shut. Even though the hall was lit only by a single shaft of daylight, it was too bright for Martmann, and he hid his face in his hands.

After some time sitting like that, he realised that his body ached almost as much as his head, his muscles cold and knotted after spending a night on the hard oak. He thought about throwing up. It seemed like a good idea in theory, although the effort, he decided, was probably too much for him.

He groaned again and took a deep, shuddering breath. He tried to

remember what he had been drinking, when, through the fog of his befuddled thoughts, there loomed the terrible memory of what he had been doing the night before.

It hadn't been drinking.

The sudden burst of panic burned through his concussion as the memories came flooding back, and, despite the painful glare, Martmann opened his eyes and peered around the gloomy interior of his hall. He realised, for the first time, that the shaft of light was not coming from the shuttered windows, but down from the very ceiling. The sunshine punched down through a hole in the roof to illuminate a ragged circle of shattered tiles, powdered with dust and stained with patches of black. The rest of the hall was as dark as night by comparison, and, apart from the flies that buzzed everywhere, it seemed to be deserted.

What in Sigmar's name had happened, Martmann wondered, as he blinked tears from his eyes and squinted into the gloom. What was that stink? It was like nothing Martmann had ever smelled before, or ever wanted to smell again. It was as sharp as rotting fish, and as cloying as sewage. It was worse than either of those things, though, and, as Martmann thought about it, his gorge rose, and he leaned forward to vomit, his body convulsing until there was nothing left in his stomach to throw up.

"Oh Sigmar," he whined miserably, tears rolling down his cheeks. He had just seen the shapes of the things that waited in the gloom around him.

They were pale things, like ghosts in the darkness, although there was a horrible, translucent reality to the black oil of their eyes and the slavering gleam of their fangs. Martmann whimpered as they edged towards him, slowly and half-seen. If it hadn't been for the occasional turn of detritus beneath their feet, or the occasional hiss of breath, he would have tried to believe that they were just figments of his imagination, of delirium tremens perhaps. Unfortunately, his vision had cleared enough for him to make out their forms, their horrible, twisted forms.

Another man might have thought about trying to find a weapon amongst the ruin around him, but not Martmann. He drew his knees up to his chest like a frightened child, and told himself that, yes, of course, this must be delirium tremens. He had seen it take other men after too much drinking. Now, it had taken him. He clung to the idea as desperately as a man holding on to the edge of an abyss.

"Sergeant?" he called out, his voice a dried-out husk.

As if in answer, something moved in the darkness beyond the shaft of sunlight, something big. Rubble shifted beneath its feet as it approached, and Martmann looked up over his knees. Whatever the

thing was, it had paused at the edge of the circle of light.

“Sergeant?” Martmann whispered.

Then, as if in answer, the horror stepped out of the darkness, and into the pool of daylight. Martmann started screaming, as mindlessly and involuntarily as a rabbit caught in a snare.

The thing that approached was like a figment of a lunatic’s nightmare. Although it was stooped and malformed, it was ten feet tall, perhaps even twelve. Its shoulders were as wide as the spreading horns of an Estalian bull, and the barrel of its chest looked as strong as a bull’s. Slabs of muscle and knuckles of bone bulged in odd places beneath the filthy translucent skin of its hide, so that it had the lumpen, misshapen look of a clay model, made by a child.

It wasn’t, however, the twisted power of its ruined form that had shattered the last of Martmann’s sanity, it was the razor-sharp nightmare of its splintered teeth, pink in the sunlight, and the rabid glitter in its eyes. Blood squirmed across the thing’s pupils so that, within the dark caverns of its orbs, they looked like twin suns of liquid flame.

Then, in the places where the sunlight hit it, the thing’s mottled skin started to steam, and then to burn.

The conflagration started at the tops of its shoulders, and spread along the ridges of muscle and bone that were also bathed with sunlight. Tiny tongues of silver flame erupted from the weird translucence of its hide to flicker over the its grotesque form, like marsh gas over a swamp.

Still the beast stood there, and, even as the translucence of its skin began to blossom with even more of the tiny, devouring flames, it reached its arms out, held its palms up to the sunlight so that they burned like phosphorous, and screamed.

It was a cry of such agony and such ecstasy that it seemed to suck the breath out of Martmann’s lungs. He, alone, was silent as, all around him, the things that waited in the shadows started baying with sympathy for their master.

It stood in the daylight that streamed down over it like a pillar of fire for a moment longer, bathing in the flames that writhed around its form like devouring stars. Then, when it could take it no more, it lurched back into the gloom of the ruined hall.

For a few seconds, sparks of light still danced across its form. Then, the fire that had bathed it was gone. The skin that remained had lost some of its translucence, and its stoop seemed to have gone, as though the fused vertebrae of its hunchback had somehow untangled beneath the agony of the sunlight.

Martmann realised that he wasn’t breathing. He sucked in a long, shuddering gulp of breath as the creature loomed over him, and, as he

gazed into the furnaces of its eyes, a miracle happened. He found that he was no longer terrified. He was no longer even afraid. For the first time since last night, he felt at peace.

It was wonderful.

He watched, as if he were a disinterested bystander at somebody else's execution, as a handful of gnarled talons reached out for him. It wasn't until they closed around the carved wood in his belt and drew it out that Martmann felt the beginnings of his fear returning, the emotion vague, but as insistent as the sound of distant drumming.

"You're one of the Striganyes' daemons," he heard himself say, as the creature sniffed at the carving, and then turned it to study the workmanship. "I didn't mean to hurt them. It was just that the baron said that any Strigany entering our lands were fair game."

The creature ignored him. It was intent on the carving, the shattered angles of its malformed features twisting into something that might have been concentration.

"I never had anything against Strigany, Sigmar knows," Martmann babbled on. "Fine folk. Brighten the place up with their caravans and funny clothing and all. It's just that I'm a soldier, and, well, if your master tells you to do something then what can you do, except obey? I was only following orders. There has to be orders, if not, the whole thing would collapse."

A talon as sharp as an eagle's claw flicked out, the movement a blur, and Martmann felt his chin being lifted so that he was looking into the creature's eyes. Beneath the gleam of stolen blood, they were as ancient and as knowing as sin.

Tell me what this is, a voice said in Martmann's head.

"It's a carving I made," Martmann replied, shuddering with revulsion at this violation of his consciousness. "Just some little thing I carved to pass the time. It's the story of Sigmar Heldenhammer. See, that's him meeting the dwarfs."

A work of art, the voice said again, the words deafening in the silence of his mind.

"Yes. That is, not a very good one."

It has been so long since I commissioned such things.

Martmann squirmed, and his left eye started to twitch. Even when words weren't forming inside his head, the alien presence of the creature's thoughts remained there, squirming through his consciousness like a maggot in a wound. Although he didn't know it, Martmann was weeping.

I think that it is time to commission a work of art, the voice decided. I will tell you what to carve, and you will carve it. I can promise you that it will be a nobler tale than that of some barbarian chieftain, and it will be on a fitting canvas.

The creature turned to the darkness. There was a brief scuffle, a shriek of pain, and, out of the darkness, a stream of grovelling creatures appeared. Martmann noticed that they were pale imitations of their master: weak, sickly things with blackened claws and lifeless eyes, and, as he watched, they started to pile bones onto the table: a skull, the gnaw marks still fresh on the pink of its cranium; a ribcage, picked clean; bones from arms and legs.

When the pile was complete, the last of the snivelling things approached, and, with a nervous look at its master, it placed Martmann's carving tool on the table beside him.

Now I will tell you the story of Mourkain. The words appeared in Martmann's head. And you will illustrate it. Start with the toes.

For a moment, Martmann didn't understand. Then he looked again at the bones on the table, and realised that this was no random assortment of remains, but the entire skeleton of one of his comrades. It was impossible to tell who that had been, although, only hours before, the man had been feasting at the very table upon which his gnawed bones now rested.

A whimper escaped from the tightness of Martmann's throat, and he tried not to think about that as, fingers trembling, he sorted through the bones, and laid out the remains of whoever it had been. Then, he picked up his carving tool, and, as the images started to blossom within the ruins of his mind, he started to carve them into the bone.

Day turned to night, and then to day again, as Martmann worked. He neither rested nor drank, and soon his eyes were as pink as his new master's with dehydration and exhaustion.

It had little effect on the quality of his work, though. The fabulous cities he carved were exquisite in their detail, and perfect in the way that they conformed to the new geography of fibula, patella and femur. The fine lords who stalked hungrily amongst the palaces seemed to be almost alive, and the joy with which the fattened populace was honoured with their master's embrace was obvious.

It wasn't until the carving reached the skeleton's pelvis that the glories of Mourkain began to be overshadowed by other, more troubling events. Whereas, before, the fevered genius of Martmann's workmanship had described nothing but scenes of terrible beauty, now they began to reveal the vile forms of the orc and the goblin. They danced among scenes of wanton destruction, each of the vertebrae, the carving now climbed, a separate tableau of violence, until, on the broader canvas of the sternum, the final battle between the wyvern-mounted orc and the Great Lord of Mourkain was revealed.

Incredibly, the orc won. The horror and disbelief of the onlookers

remained on their faces, as, along each of the skeleton's ribs, scenes of massacre and of flight were revealed. The city was razed to the ground, and the people of Mourkain were driven into the wilderness.

Martmann's fingers were bleeding freely, and his whole body had begun to shake. There was no mistake in his portrayal of Mourkain's lords, though. As they struggled through the wilderness, they were set upon by beings almost as beautiful as they were. Soon, only a few remained to crouch and slink through the abandoned places of the world. Their forms, bent beneath the weight of their loss, and twisted by the offal they scrounged on, loped down both of the skeleton's arms, their forms degenerating from scapula to humerus, and from humerus to wrist.

The other refugees fared better. There was no mistaking that the wagons they built were those of the Strigany. They were identical to the ones that Martmann had burned only a few short weeks ago.

They travelled up the last few vertebrae from the ruins of their city, and around the back of the skeleton's skull. It was only at the front of its cranium that the wagons stopped, giving way to three verses written in a language that Martmann had never seen, until now, as he carved the letters into the skeleton's cranium.

Only then was he allowed to drop his bloodied chisel, and stagger away from his work. He hardly realised what a masterpiece he had created among the chippings of bone. He hardly cared. All he cared about was the sudden, savage oblivion that was all the reward his patron could offer.

As far as the shattered thing that had been Martmann was concerned, that oblivion was reward enough. He sat in the ruins of the fortress, and stared at his pink-boned work of art. His eyes glowed with the reflection of the battles and wonders that had been etched into the skeleton, but he was also seeing other, more distant scenes.

For the first time in an aeon, he had dared to remember, and the remembering was hard: the lost glories of his court, the silks, the graces, and the sunshine, always the sunshine. How it had sparkled and glowed on his lands and on his city. How it had made the river glitter and the corn fields glow like oceans of gold.

Maybe it had been the rare taste of fresh blood that had driven him to feel the sunlight on his skin today. The pain had been excruciating, but worth it. It had done something to him, the cleansing fire washing away the most horrific of his deformities, even as it had awakened something that had for so long lain dormant within the lightless depths of his withered soul.

How fair he had once been. Even amongst the most handsome of his race, he had been the cleanest-limbed, the clearest-eyed, as strong as a god and as wise as a prophet. His name had been carved onto

every heart of an entire people. Now, he couldn't even remember it.

Tears of blood trickled down his ravaged features, tears of loss, and of frustration and rage: most of all, tears of rage. The ghouls who followed him, sensing their master's mood, whined and bickered, and slunk away into the darkest corners of the hall. He watched them, hatred in his eyes. Once he had had legions of servants, chosen from among the ripest of humanity: artists, courtesans, musicians, poets, athletes.

Now all he had were these vermin.

The tears stopped as his rage found an outlet. He stood, straighter than he had in a thousand years, and turned to study his ruined followers, as they gibbered and clutched at each other. A sudden revulsion lent an edge to his rage, and he flexed his claws. He wouldn't besmirch his pallet with the taste of these things' vile blood.

As he fell upon them, some of the ghouls tried to flee. Most, though, lacked the will. They cowered, skinny arms raised uselessly, as their master slaughtered them, snuffing out their worthless lives. The hall echoed with their shrieks of bewilderment and terror as their master snapped necks, slashed out throats, and tore bodies in half.

When the final ghoul lay twitching out the last of its life on the floor, he returned to the blade of sunlight that cut down like a guillotine into the blood-soaked darkness of the hall. As he prepared to step forward, he remembered his name, and, with the joy of it twisting his face into a snarl of joy, he stepped, once more, into the light.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“It is not the strength of our leaders that gives us unity, it is the strength of our enemies.”

– Strigany saying Even as Blysedon continued with his briefing, the Strigany were beginning their own deliberations.

The crudely built amphitheatre where they were being held had been set up in the centre of their encampment, built by the Strigany's carpenters from dozens of spare wagons and carts. The timber had been stripped from the vehicles, and hammered and lashed into two tiers of seats that went around a reed matted central clearing. Since night had fallen, a ring of pitch torches lit all within. The sputtering light they cast, and the shape of the enclosed amphitheatre, made it look like an Estalian bull ring.

Although there was none of the chanting or the stamping of feet that accompanied the Estalians' favourite blood sport, the air was just as thick with tension. This was the first time that the domnus of all the caravans had been gathered together, and, even though there was space for three hundred people in the amphitheatre, the seats were packed, the grey bearded and grizzled domnus squeezed together in the stalls like children in the back of a wagon.

Only the petrus had space to stretch out. They occupied the eastern side of the arena, which was the most sheltered from the elements. Their black robes and glittering eyes made them look like a flock of ravens, who were waiting for something to die, which, tonight, they were.

The oldest of the petrus waited until they were assembled, before emerging from the shadows. The hubbub of raised voices quietened, as the elder glided towards the centre of the amphitheatre. He carried a staff, but, despite his age, he held it more like a bandit with a weapon than an old man with a crutch.

“My family,” he called to them, his voice carrying effortlessly to every corner of the amphitheatre, “welcome!”

“Welcome,” three hundred voices boomed, and the elder smiled in approval.

“It has done my heart good,” he told them, “to have seen so many of our people gathered together. To see the youth of the children, and the skill of their parents, and, of course, the wisdom of their elders.”

His eyes twinkled, and there was cautious laughter.

“Although it is nice to see you here, my family, it is a hard season that has brought us together.”

The faces of the crowd grew solemn. Many of them had lost friends and loved ones on the trek, and all of them had suffered.

“We are gathered here today,” the petru continued, “to talk about how to face this season, but we are also gathered her today to elect a Kazarkhan, a domnu of domnus, so that we may better face the chaos of the times ahead.”

There was a rumble of conversation, quickly suppressed as the elder raised his staff for silence.

“Are there any here who will not accept the leadership of the Kazarkhan we will choose tonight?”

There was some shuffling and some sideways glances but nothing more.

“So be it,” the elder said. Then he paused, looked down, and gathered his breath. When he spoke again, his voice boomed so deeply that it barely seemed possible from such a frail old chest.

“Who among us would be Kazarkhan?”

As soon as the question had been asked, a chorus of voices started from different parts of the amphitheatre, all of them calling Brock’s name. He waited for a moment, before responding to his supporters’ encouragement, rising to his feet and walking down towards the elder.

Brock was dressed in a purple tunic, which reached to his knees, and a wide, leather belt. His beard had been oiled, so that it gleamed in the lamplight, his hair twisted back into a rope that resembled a bull’s tail, and the socket of his ruined eye covered by a silk patch.

Even if he had stepped into the ring naked, Petru Engel decided as he watched his domnu step down onto the matting, there would be no doubting his power. It was in every movement, every step, and gesture, and expression.

“My name is Brock,” he said, booming out the well-rehearsed words, “and, should our family so desire, I will serve as Kazarkhan.”

There was a roar of approval from his supporters, and he stood, shoulders back and head slowly turning to make eye contact with as many of the other domnus as he could.

Some nodded. Some didn’t. None looked away.

Just when it seemed that Brock would be selected unopposed, the deafening shouting on the other side of the amphitheatre flowered into a roar of approval, and another man stepped down.

He was a great bull of a man, perhaps a head taller than the tallest of the men around him, and he was well built. Muscle bulged beneath his broad leather tunic and flared breeches, and, although his beard was full enough to be grabbed by two fists, his head was as smooth as an egg.

No doubt, Brock thought, as he squared up to his rival, it will be just as satisfying to crack.

“My name is Domnu Zelnikov,” the big man said. He waited for the cheers of his supporters and the boos of Brock’s to die down,

before continuing, "And if my family wants it, I will lead you as Kazarkhan, lead you to victory!"

The chant started from the tier where the man had sat, but soon spread as others took it up.

"Zel Ni Kov! Zel Ni Kov!"

Feet stamped in time with the chant, and the big man beamed a crocodilian grin.

Already, Brock's supporters had begun their own chant, and, as he heard his name booming from a hundred throats, the domnu couldn't keep a wolfish grin off his face.

The elder, who had been watching the commotion with the indulgent patience of a grandfather watching toddlers at play, finally stepped forward, lifted his staff and hissed for silence.

Both Brock and Zelnikov turned to their supporters, and waved them to silence. Nobody wanted a fool for a Kazarkhan, and who else would defy the wishes of the petrus?

"I see two men, two Kazarkhans. Are there any more amongst us who would serve?" he asked.

There were some catcalls, a jeer, and an outburst of laughter, but no more volunteers.

"Then we have two," the elder said, nodding as if he had expected nothing else, "but, as Kazarkhan, two men cannot take the place of one. Shall we vote, my family, like the peasants, or shall we leave the decision to the hidden hands of our ancestors, and the invisible and indivisible favour of Ushoran?"

"Ushoran," the crowd roared. Their enthusiasm was so great that it hid the unease that lay behind most of their eyes. The Striganies' god was, after all, not a god to be summoned lightly.

The elder allowed himself a small, cynical smile, and then stepped back. The two would-be Kazarkhans turned to look at each other, their shared predicament making them brothers in this moment, just as it would make them murderous foes in the next.

"Then, my family, we shall allow those who walk silently among us to decide," the elder said, and the voice of the crowd died. "As you know, there are many who follow our caravans, many who would protect us for as long as we honour our customs. Sharp of tooth, some are, or twisted limbed, or terrible in ways that you cannot imagine."

The elder's voice dropped as he spoke, but, in the breathless hush of the amphitheatre, that hardly mattered. The terror of their lore had always been a match for the terrors of the Empire, and, of all the petrus, the elder was the most adept at playing upon it, like a musician on some terrible harp.

"Not a pin drops," he continued, "without those who follow us hearing it, not a word spoken or a deed done. Ushoran's legions are all

seeing and everywhere: in the shadows of your wagons, in the secrecy of your thoughts, and, here, among us, waiting to judge.”

The silence of the amphitheatre was as complete as that of the void between the stars that glittered above. The only sounds came from the camp beyond: the sobbing of children, the hushed voices of their mothers, and the whinnying of horses. Those who were already asleep murmured, as shade passed through their dreams, and, somewhere, a man screamed.

“So, I ask you again,” the elder asked, the whiplash of his voice hardly rising above a whisper, “in the contest for Kazarkhan, will you accept the judgement of unseen Ushoran?”

There was no reply. Then, a man stood, his hair a white flash in the gloom. He raised his hand in salute, and shouted the single word, “Ushoran!”

The amphitheatre exploded as, wild with an enthusiasm that bordered on hysteria, every man repeated the name of their terrible god. The elder let them continue, until he realised how loose the joints of the amphitheatre were becoming under the stamping of their feet.

“Then so be it,” he bellowed, waving them to silence. “We have cast our die. Now, let us see,” he said, grinning with a bloodthirsty enthusiasm, “how they fall for our two Kazarkhans. Strip, my brothers,” he commanded them, and they did.

Brock, lost in the world of the ordeal ahead, unbuckled his belt and pulled off his tunic.

“Here, I’ll take it.”

Brock turned to find Mihai standing beside him. He hid his surprise at seeing that his son had braved the wrath of the petrus to step into the ring.

“Thanks,” he said, grateful for the sight of Mihai’s face before the contest began.

He carried on undressing, slipping off his boots, until all he wore was a loincloth. He had had it bleached white this morning, in case this moment came, but, now that it had, he realised that it made absolutely no difference anymore.

What did make a difference was the sight of Mihai.

Brock shifted awkwardly.

“Mihai...” he began, and then trailed off. “I want you to know...”

He struggled to find the words, any words. Why couldn’t he tell his son that he was proud of him? That he loved him?

Mihai saw the helplessness in his father’s eyes, and understood, and with the understanding came a sudden fear. It had never occurred to him that his father could lose, until now.

“Win for us, domnu,” he said.

Brock suddenly found himself unable to speak. Instead, he

gripped his son by the shoulder, his fingers squeezing hard enough to bruise the flesh, and nodded.

Then, not trusting the stinging in his eyes, he turned back to face his opponent. The bald man looked equally subdued by the moment. Brock noted that, although he carried a lot of weight, it was muscle more than fat, and, despite his bulk, the man moved with the easy grace of a swordsman.

Brock, his own form as scarred and sinewy as a vipers, stepped forwards to slap his hand against his opponent's.

The elder looked on with approval. Then, he bid them step back to opposite ends of the amphitheatre. When they had taken their places, he raised his staff and said simply, "One man leaves here as Kazarkhan."

He paused, enjoying the hush.

"The other leaves as a corpse."

The crowd sighed with what could almost have been pleasure.

"Begin!"

So saying, the elder slipped away from the two men, as they closed in on each other.

Brock and Zelnikov approached each other with a painful slowness. The seconds stretched out into minutes, as Brock, shoulders low and fingers outstretched, drew closer to his opponent. He could see the fear in his eyes, and it would have given him some comfort if he hadn't known that the same emotion was reflected in his own.

Death in combat was seldom easy, He knew, from long, hard, bloody experience that death in combat was seldom easy, but death in unarmed combat...

Zelnikov made his move.

The big man screamed as he charged, a curiously falsetto sound for somebody so large. There was fear in the sound, and rage. Mostly, though, it was the desperation of a man whose existence has been reduced to the stark monochrome choice of kill or be killed.

Brock, his single eye widening, and his yellow teeth bared, leapt forward to meet his opponent. He slapped aside the punch that would have broken his jaw, and sprang to one side, spinning to punch the hard blade of his curled fingers into the man's kidneys.

Zelnikov was an old enough brawler to have learned the painful lessons of an exposed back before. As soon as he realised that Brock

was behind him, he fell, rolled, and bounced back to his feet.

The crowd roared their approval.

The sound goaded Brock, as he made his attack. He kept himself small and compact, hands held loosely to his chest, as he closed in on the big man, who jabbed at him with a punch.

This time, the blow caught Brock on the side of the head. The skin was torn open, and, as the first blood of the contest splattered across the ground, the crowd leapt to its feet, their voices merging into a wall of sound.

Brock ignored the sound, just as he ignored the pain, and the bright lights that flew through his field of vision like sparks. Zelnikov jabbed another fist up towards his chin, in what could have been a paralysing blow, but Brock was close enough to grab his opponent's throat.

He felt the tickle of the man's beard as he squeezed, snarling like a wolf, as his eye glittered with the savage joy of victory.

Zelnikov fell back, an expression of surprise on his mottling face. He punched Brock in the side, twice with each fist, and hard enough to snap one of his ribs.

Brock ignored the blows. His grip grew tighter.

Zelnikov, the first flash of panic shining in his bulging eyes, dug his fingers into the bundles of nerves hidden in his opponent's armpits. Pain flared through Brock's body, and his bared teeth opened as he screamed with agony.

Not that it did Zelnikov any good. Even as he adjusted his grip to twist a fresh symphony of pain from the one-eyed man who was strangling him, his strength was fading. His knees suddenly gave, and he fell backwards, twisting, so that Brock was beneath him.

They lay together in the dirt, as close as lovers, as Brock choked the last few inches of Zelnikov's life from him. The bigger man's eyes rolled up, as white as Mannslieb above the forest of his beard.

Brock bit down the pity that twisted so treacherously within him. It wasn't as though he hadn't killed before. The bones of his victims lay scattered all over the battlegrounds of his younger days. It wasn't as if he hadn't killed this close before, either, or this slowly, brutally, or painfully.

When it came right down to it, Brock thought, killing your enemy, before he killed you, was every Strigany's duty.

Even so, the joy of victory curdled into grim determination as his victim's struggles became as weak as the fluttering of a bird. Brock shifted his weight, and prepared to put him out of both of their misery.

That was when he collapsed.

Brock had never felt the like of it before. It was as if every bone

in his body had been dissolved, every muscle flensed. He couldn't even draw breath to scream, and even the endless rhythm of his pulse paused.

His fingers slipped from Zelnikov's grizzled throat, and he rolled away from his enemy's body onto the flattened ground below.

So this was what the elder meant by the will of Ushoran, he thought, as he lay, pulseless and unbreathing in the circle of the amphitheatre.

Ushoran.

His heart started. He sucked in a great gasping breath, and his limbs thrashed as his muscles twitched back into life. His vision cleared, too, just in time to see the grubby heel that Zelnikov was smashing down onto his throat.

Brock moved, but not quickly enough. He saw the calluses and spiralled grooves of Zelnikov's foot, and then nothing but a blinding flash of pain, as it crunched down onto his nose.

Zelnikov raised his foot to stamp down again. It was a mistake. Brock seized his ankle and twisted, throwing the big man off-balance, and using his staggering form to pull himself up off the floor.

Fingers flashed towards his throat, and he bit down. There was a crunch of gristle and a scream. A fist clipped against his head. He staggered back and raised his knee, the joint thudding into flesh.

Suddenly, the two men found themselves standing alone, lurching away from the ground they had bloodied.

Brock shook his head, ignoring the constellation of dancing lights and spattering blood drops. He ignored the pain, too, the broken-boned, shattered cartilage pain. The only thing that he couldn't ignore was the knowledge that, at the moment of victory, Ushoran had spoken.

His head lowered like a bull's, and he watched Zelnikov massaging his throat. The bruises were already dark enough to be seen in the lamp light. So, he thought, that is the man Ushoran wants to win.

Well, to hell with Ushoran.

I am Kazarkhan.

I will win.

With that thought, he flung himself into a fresh attack.

He had almost reached his target when, with a whoosh of air escaping from his collapsing chest, his strength vanished, and he tumbled forwards into Zelnikov's fist. Petru Engel hadn't been concerned when Brock had met his challenger. He had known the domnu since he had been a child, and had no doubt that his ferocity would be enough to win the day.

It wasn't until the petru felt the pricking in his thumbs that he

realised that something was wrong. Of course, he had told himself, none of his fellows would use their craft to interfere in such a contest. In business, or war, or politics, then yes, perhaps, but not here. It would break every taboo, every principle of their lore.

Brock had collapsed at his moment of victory, and, as the hair had risen on the back of Engel's neck, he had known it. Someone was willing to interfere with the contest.

As Brock had fallen, the petru had leapt to his feet to look around at his fellows. Most of them were straining forward, lost in the bloody struggle beneath them. A few, though, were glancing around, their expressions as shocked as Engel's own.

He locked eyes with one of them, a hook-nosed man, who he had never seen before. The man nodded in understanding, and Engel knew that he had not been the only one to have felt the violation.

Together, the two of them returned to looking for the culprit.

Engel found that his gaze was skittering uselessly over the dozens of black-robed figures that surrounded him. He paused, closed his eyes and took a breath.

Then he looked again.

Brock and Zelnikov had rolled clear of each other to stand as patiently as animals in a slaughterhouse. Petru Engel searched the crowd, the faces that were twisted in fear, or horror, or good old-fashioned bloodlust.

Then Brock charged, and, as he collapsed once more, Engel saw his man.

He was thin-faced and grey-haired, and, although he was dressed in the leather tunic and sack cloth breeches of a butcher, he was like no butcher that Engel had ever seen. As the men around him roared and stamped their feet, and hurled abuse and advice at the two battling men below, this one sat as still as a doll, his dark eyes hooded, his fingers interlaced, and his features composed.

"You!" Engel yelled at him, but to no avail. As Brock had gone down, the crowd had leapt to its feet, wild with the anticipation of a kill.

Engel pushed his way through his fellows, tripping down towards the ring. When he got to the edge, he gathered up his robes, ready to leap over the edge, so as to race across the pit to stop this rogue petru.

Before he could jump, however, he saw the elder appear behind his foe. The men around him leapt out of his way without quite realising why, and he emerged from the crowd like a black granite rock from the waves.

The false butcher, all of his attention fixed on his work, had no idea of the doom that was upon him. The elder reached out, and, with a gentle caress, he gripped the back of the man's neck.

The man's hooded eyes flickered open, and his mouth opened in a wide "O" of surprise. Then, with a sudden convulsion, he collapsed back onto his seat, as dead as a bag of meat.

The elder looked up, met Engel's eyes, and smiled. Then, as the crowd roared at another twist in the vicious combat below, he melted back into their ranks, unseen and unheard.

The domnus, unaware of what had happened, closed back in after he had passed, and apart from the cooling corpse of the rogue petru, which lay, as yet unnoticed, at their feet, the elder might never have been there. This time, when Brock recovered, he realised that it was too late. He was held face down on the floor, his arm twisted so far behind him that the gristle was being chewed up by the bones of his shoulder. Meanwhile, Zelnikov was searching for the arteries in his neck, eager to return the favour of his earlier strangulation.

Brock waited until he felt the big man's fingertips, before he twisted away, throwing all of his weight into a manoeuvre that threw Zelnikov off him, even as it tore his arm from its socket.

The domnu howled with pain, and, his limb dangling uselessly beside him, he took his one chance to finish the fight: his only chance, his forlorn chance.

As Zelnikov rolled to his feet, Brock leapt forward, taking the blinding impact of his opponent's open palm on his already smashed nose, and stamping down onto one of his knees.

The blow connected, tearing off a knee cap so that it slid down beneath the skin of Zelnikov's shin. He fell, and Brock, stepping back, twisted a kick up under the black bushel of his beard.

Zelnikov's head snapped back and he collapsed onto his back. His eyes fluttered shut. Before they could flutter open, Brock fell upon him.

Crippled by the loss of his arm, he had no choice in the manner of his opponent's execution. This would be no soft strangulation, or swift snap of the spine.

This would be nothing so civilised.

Brock's lips snarled back to reveal teeth that were as strong and as yellow as a wolf's. Half delirious with pain, blood on fire with adrenaline, it didn't take much for him to bend over the grizzled hair of Zelnikov's neck, ignore the taste of sweat, and bite down.

Brock found himself growling as his teeth ripped at his opponent's flesh. Blood spurted, hot and sickening, and, as he swallowed it, he began to choke with vomit.

Still, even as he heaved, and the hot spray of vomit vented through the closed cage of his teeth and the ruined meat of his nose, Brock paused only to spit out the first goblet of flesh, and fasten his teeth back into Zelnikov's throat.

The big man regained consciousness, but it was already too late. His life was escaping through one torn artery, and Brock was busily chewing his way through the other.

All the big man could do was scream as he died, a terrible, gurgling sound that Brock would never forget, could never forget.

Later, Zelnikov lay still, his throat a red ruin all the way down to his pink vertebrae. Brock sat beside him, his one eye glassy, his features torn and bruised, his head and chest covered with Zelnikov's blood and his own.

Then the chanting started.

It began from Zelnikov's own ranks: a single word, a single throated roar that pounded through Brock's shock like the waves of some terrible ocean pounding against a mysterious shore.

"Kazarkhan."

Already, the chant had spread to the rest of the amphitheatre, and the assembled dignitaries were on their feet, stamping and pounding their fists into their palms to mark each syllable of the honorific.

"Kazarkhan."

Brock didn't want to get up. He didn't want to move at all. He just wanted to lie next to the body of his opponent, and wait for the ravens.

Even through the fog of his shock, he knew that what he wanted didn't come into it. He was Kazarkhan, he was his people's war leader.

He got to his feet, and the chanting disintegrated into a roar of approval. Brock grinned, bearing his teeth in a pink crescent that belied the deadness of his eyes. Then he raised the limb that hadn't been broken in a salute.

"For Ushoran," he bellowed, pink flecks of spittle flying from his mouth, and his one eye glittering madly.

The crowd roared the name back at him, and Brock's grin grew wider.

The elder had emerged from the shadows to stand beside Brock. He saw that the man was bloodied, battered, dazed with shock, and half dead with pain, yet, he was grinning.

The elder approved.

Raising his staff for silence, he turned to the crowd.

"Ushoran," he said, "has chosen his champion. Will you follow him?"

One word. One voice, "Yes!"

As if summoned by the unity of the Strigany, two men, sentries from the barricade across the road, thundered into the ring.

"They're here!" the first cried, even as he leapt from his horse. "Averland's men are here!"

The sentry was white-faced, and there was a dark patch on his

cloak, which looked like blood. His comrade remained in the saddle, perhaps not wanting to move the arrow that was buried in the meat of his thigh.

Brock, half-naked and covered in blood, glared at him with one glittering eye.

“How many?” he asked, his voice seeming to come from somebody else.

“Thousands,” the sentry cried. “They came from everywhere at once. I don’t know how many of us escaped.”

“All right,” Brock said. He nodded, sensing the hysteria that lurked behind the man’s words. “You are safe here.”

Then he paused, gazing sightlessly at Zelnikov’s ruined body.

“Do you have any orders, Kazarkhan?” the elder asked.

Brock hesitated. He was dazed, sickened and dizzy with pain. He needed medical treatment and rest, and to arrange Zelnikov’s funeral. Meanwhile, of the tens of thousands of people gathered in Flintmar, none had a rank, or a task, or any idea what to do, and the enemy was upon them.

On the other hand, Brock told himself, I am the chosen of Ushoran.

Those odds were good enough for him.

“Make them quiet,” he told the elder, and then, in the nervous silence of the bloody amphitheatre, Brock started issuing his orders.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“The only victors of any battle are the ravens.”

– Peasant saying In the grey light of dawn, Blysedden had chosen a small hillock for his headquarters. It was the only a bit of high ground in this blighted heath, and so it was here, amongst the windswept grass and stunted bushes, that he had planted his army’s standard in the dew-soaked grass. It was no more than a black cross that had been stitched onto a white field, and, although it was a drab thing compared to most battle flags, Blysedden was happy with it. It was simple, it was functional and it served its purpose; all qualities that Blysedden admired.

Behind him, his campaign tent was still being set up over the hastily-buried pay chest, but, although the sun had barely risen, he had already had his cartographer’s table set up and his signal rockets unpacked.

The wood and canvas expanse of the Striganies’ encampment lay about half a mile away. It had spread like a dark stain across the brown expanse of the wasteland, the shacks and wagons even darker than the withered heath. Thin wisps of smoke from morning cooking fires rose straight into the still air, with not even the faintest breeze to stir them, and tiny figures went blithely about their business within the camp.

“They don’t seem to be expecting us,” Vespero gloated. Blysedden had kept the Tilean’s company with him as a private guard, but the honour seemed to have gone to Vespero’s head. He wouldn’t stop talking.

“Don’t be fooled,” Blysedden replied. “If they weren’t expecting us, why send the assassin? Anyway, they must have noticed the loss of their pickets by now.”

Vespero shrugged.

“I don’t know if that man was an assassin. Northerners are a weak-minded lot, and they have a tendency to crack up. I’ve seen it before.”

Blysedden said nothing. It really didn’t matter what the Tilean thought, just so long as he and his company stayed close. He would have preferred to keep the ogres for his personal guard, but he had other plans for them.

“Tubs, pass me the telescope,” he snapped. His clerk handed him the instrument, and then knelt down, so that his master could rest its long, brass tube on his shoulder.

Blysedden peered through the miraculous arrangement of lenses, and the distance between him and his companies disappeared. He had

gathered over three thousand mercenaries on his way to this miserable place. His ragtag army contained soldiers from many provinces and many races. It contained every variety of fool, cutthroat and hero. Even so, despite their differences, his men were all dogs of war, and each of them had been trained, armed, hardened and sharpened by a lifetime of battle. Compared to them, the bands of miserable-looking militiamen that Averland had pressed into service were a poor sight. Where the mercenaries' strode, they skulked, and where the mercenaries waited, they huddled.

Well, never mind, Blysedon thought. At least their captains are competent. They might not be as good as the mercenaries, leaders with the brains and the balls to hold their villainous crews together with little more than force of will, but at least there were no feudal wranglings either. Blysedon had let the militias elect their own leaders, and they were stronger because of it.

Blysedon congratulated himself on the tactic as he watched them struggling through the heath towards their positions. He was pleased to see that not a single one of them was out of place.

This won't be a battle, he thought, it will be a slaughter. He thought back to other massacres, and a slow, satisfied smile crept across his face.

"Where are the giants?" Vespero asked, and Blysedon fought back the urge to tell him to shut up. The Tilean was not a man to be offended at the best of times, let alone when the strongest barrier between him and the paymaster's chest was his sense of honour.

"Our friends are being held in reserve," Blysedon said.

"You should have sent them in with the main attack," Vespero said. "Their shock value must not be underestimated. Even I found them quite imposing, and I am not impressed by much."

Blysedon sucked his teeth before replying. "Their shock value will be used when and where it is most effective," he said.

"As you say," Vespero said. "As you know, I and my fellows would have liked to be sent in with the first wave. We itch for action, and are ever at the forefront of every battle."

"I need men of honour to guard my headquarters," Blysedon said, and the Tilean's chest swelled.

Satisfied that his formations were moving into place, Blysedon turned the telescope back to the Strigany camp. Despite the fact that dawn had broken almost two hours ago, not many of them seemed to be up, the lazy swine.

"Of course, it may be just as well that we are not in the first wave," Vespero prattled on. "Our character is such that we could not countenance combat against women and children, and the Strigany are sure to use them in the battle. No doubt, their harpies would use

our chivalry against us.”

“Yes,” Blysedon said, although he had not been listening to a single word. He was too busy wondering why not a single man seemed visible among the wood smoke, and bustle of the camp. Perhaps, he considered, they were all hung over, or just plain idle.

He frowned, and then whacked his clerk across the back of his head to stop him from fidgeting and moving the telescope.

“These northerners make terrible servants,” Vespero commented sympathetically. “In Tilea, our retainers are pillars of strength. My cousin, the Magistrate Teo Polidorente, used to practise his marksmanship with a crossbow by balancing pieces of fruit on top of his servants’ heads. They always show marvellous courage. He gets through about a dozen a year.”

Blysedon grunted, and turned his attention to the stockade that surrounded the Strigany’s camp. A single cordon of interlocked wooden staves sat on top of a continuous earth bank. They would have been enough to break a cavalry charge, he thought, but apart from the squadron of Kislevite lancers, who waited on the road below, he had no cavalry. The ground was too broken for it.

“They don’t have the intelligence to adapt to a new environment,” Blysedon mused. “Strange for such cunning folk.”

“Oh, it wasn’t really their fault,” Vespero said. “Teo wouldn’t let them wear steel helmets. He said the shine of them put him off his aim.”

“What?” Blysedon asked, turning to him.

“The shine of the helmets,” Vespero repeated. “Don’t forget, the sun in Tilea is brighter and more cheerful than this weak-blooded northern one. Ah, how I miss my homeland.”

Blysedon considered asking him what the hell he was babbling on about. Instead, he put his eye back to the telescope, and watched the developing pattern of his encircling troops. They had only left one gap, which would encourage the panicking Strigany within to flee back along the road.

Once there, they would have to face the lancers. The Kislevites were an awesome sight, each of them mounted on a pale stallion, and resplendent in armour and feathers, and sharp, sharp steel. If any of the Strigany managed to get past them, they would really be in trouble.

Blysedon smiled with grim satisfaction. His beasts would eat well tonight. He turned the brass length of the telescope to the patch of swamp to the west, where the ogres were making their way slowly forwards. Most of them were submerged in the filthy waters, and, as they ploughed forwards, their heads rolled like grey boulders above the marsh.

Blysedden twisted a focusing wheel on the telescope, and one of the ogre's heads sharpened into focus. A cloud of flies and biting insects was swarming around it, although Blysedden had an idea that the ogre's hide was proof against their attacks. Its smeared features remained as calm as ever, and it made no move to shoo the insects away.

"I wish that I had brought a crossbow," Vespero said, still lost in the happy memories of his homeland. "Look at the birds, circling above. I've never seen such a flock. It would have been fine sport to see how many we could have brought down."

"Yes," Blysedden said.

Content with all that he had seen, he stood back up, rubbed his eyes and stretched his back. Everything was going like clockwork. In fact, he was so confident that he was even considering sending the Tileans down, if only to shut up their captain. As far as he could see, nothing could go wrong. Dannie sat CROSS-legged on the ground of the amphitheatre. He had pulled his hood over his eyes, and, in the shade it cast, only the lower part of his face could be seen. His lips moved as he silently repeated the words of the charm that Petru Engel had taught him. Other apprentices sat around him, the hiss of their breath keeping perfect rhythm with his own. Here and there, petrus stood over them, the older men watching them for any errors in their repetition or their cadence.

Flintmar's petrus and their apprentices had been gathered here since before dawn. The younger members had been given a simple charm to repeat, a small enough conjuration, but, when spoken as part of this terrible choir, a powerful thing, especially when shaped by some of the more expert of the petrus.

Gathering like some taloned storm cloud, the birds wheeled above the clearing. They had been arriving ever since dawn, and it was amazing how many had been gathered from this wilderness. Their breeds and plumage were as varied as the mercenaries', which were, even now, closing in below. Ravens, black as night; herons, ghostly grey against a greyer sky; sharp-winged hawks and wheeling buzzards, were all there. There were even vultures, their feathers as black as an undertaker's smock, and their heads bald.

Despite their differences, the flock moved with a perfect, wheeling harmony. They soared around Flintmar in a wide, lazy circle that made an umbrella above the ragged township. Only the centre of the circle remained empty so that the sky above the petrus was as clear as that at the centre of a hurricane.

Dannie couldn't see this huge, gathering flock, his eyes remaining closed as he chanted, but he could feel it. Petru Engel had taught him the way to shape his thoughts, as he shaped his words, and he felt

himself slipping into the blizzard of consciousness above him. He knew that the birds were impatient to begin, hungry for the spoils.

For a brief moment, he saw the ground below them, and felt the bright hunger of the carrion bird whose eyes he was sharing.

Dannie shuddered, and with a rush of vertigo, found himself back in his body, fumbling over the words of the charm. One of the petrus, a lean old weasel of a man with a goatee beard, saw his distraction, and whacked him on the back with a laundry stick.

“Concentrate,” the elder snarled.

Recovering, the apprentice continued to chant. “Those birds are really quite something,” Vespero said. “Maybe I will send back to the main camp for my hunting bow.”

Blysedden ignored him. He was squinting through the telescope again, this time at the last of the ogres. It emerged from the dank embrace of the swamp, and joined its comrades on the somewhat drier ground of the heath beyond.

Most of the other units had found their positions. They waited, hunched down in an effort to keep out of sight. Blysedden had never dared to hope that his deployment would remain unnoticed for so long, but he was glad that he had ordered his men to make the attempt. Against all the odds, their stealth actually seemed to be working.

He checked the different units, and then looked back at the Strigany encampment. There was a group of women, weaving what looked like a tapestry, completely unaware that, not a hundred yards from them, a company of Marienburgers was ready to pounce.

“Can you see the Kislevites yet?” Blysedden asked his clerk, without looking up.

“Not yet, commander,” Tubs said, unhappily. He had joined his elector count’s court as a scribe, because he had wanted a quiet life indoors.

“Never mind,” Blysedden decided. “I’m sure that they’ve already sealed the road further down.”

“We would be honoured to make up for their error, my lord,” Vespero said with a small bow.

“Yes,” said Blysedden, pursing his lips, his attention already turning back to the encircled settlement below. Once the order to attack was given, there would be no going back. The die would be cast.

He sighed and, dismissing a sudden sense of trepidation, he gave the signal.

Two of his assistants, who had been looking forward to this moment all week, lit their tapers from the brazier, and hurried over to light the fuses on the rockets. There was an angry hiss as they caught

light, a sputtering of sparks and smoke, and then a sudden whoosh, as the fireworks shot up into the sky. All eyes followed their grey tails, and watched them explode in thunderclaps of smoke.

Even before the clouds of smoke had dispersed, the companies below had raised and unfurled their banners. They bloomed like the flowers of some terrible spring, and, with war cries in a dozen different dialects echoing in their throats, the companies closed in on Flintmar.

Blysedden watched the rush of a company of Estalians through the telescope. They were stocky men, most of whom were armed with matching cutlasses and leather armour. Blysedden remembered that they always seemed to smell of cloves, and, through the miraculous mechanism of his telescope, he could see that their leader was chewing. He was a big man, black-bearded, and strong enough to wield his weapons as though they were no more than switches. He bounded towards the Striganies' stockade, like a dog that has spotted a hare, his men following him eagerly.

Blysedden snatched a quick glance at the encampment, and swore. The women and children he had been watching, just seconds ago, all seemed to be armed with crude weapons. Daggers had been fastened onto the ends of broomsticks, and irons hung at the end of ropes. One woman held two butcher's knives, one in each hand, and, behind her, a gaggle of grubby children were already twirling their slings.

"So they were expecting us," he muttered. "I knew it."

"It's not your fault," Vespero told him patronisingly. "After all, look at the men you had to work with. A good workman always blames his tools."

Blysedden ignored the misquote, and turned back to watch the Estalians' advance accelerate into a charge. They burst from the last of the heath to rush across the flattened mud and refuse that separated the heath from the stockade.

They were less than a dozen feet from it, and some of them were already lining their cutlasses to chop through the knots that held the stockade together, when the ground beneath them collapsed.

Even at this distance, Blysedden could hear the collective howl as their front ranks were swallowed up by the earth. He leapt away from his telescope as if it had bitten him, and stared out to where the remaining Estalians had staggered to a halt. He watched the first of them step gingerly down into the pit. Whether it was to help a fallen comrade, or to advance through it, Blysedden never found out. He was already watching, as another regiment crashed into a hidden pit.

Meanwhile, behind the stockade, slings began to blur, and bows to twang. As the mercenaries stalled beneath the treacherous barricades, the first of them were already falling beneath the

Striganyes' arrows and stones. Their screams joined the chorus from the victims who already lay writhing at the bottom of the pit traps.

"Archers!" Blysedden yelled, turning to Tubs, and bellowing the command into his face. The clerk seized the red signal flag from a rack, and started waving furiously, the cloth snapping despite the lack of any breeze.

Below him, the archers stood up from their hides, stretched, and drew their bows. There were hundreds of them concentrated on each flank, and the arcs of their weapons bent back, like a field of wheat stalks beneath a strong wind.

When they fired, none of the archers bothered to find individual targets. There were enough of them to fill the air with a barbed storm that was thick enough to cast its own shadow. The arrows hissed as they fell, goose-feathered and razor-tipped, into the Strigany camp. Then the sound of their flight was lost beneath the screams of their victims, which could be heard even at this distance.

Blysedden grabbed at his telescope to watch as the deadly rain fell upon Flintmar. He saw a woman, who had been holding a scythe, hit in the back, the arrow punching through her ribs to bury itself in her heart. She fell, dead before she knew it. Beside her a child of about ten stooped to help her up, and was in turn skewered.

This time, fate was not so merciful. The arrow lodged in the bones of his shoulder, and he was still conscious as he fell forward onto the corpse of his mother.

He was not alone in his cry of horror and of pain. All around him, dozens of his people had been cut down, and dozens more wounded.

Blysedden felt relief coursing through him. As the archer companies prepared to loose another volley, he turned to watch the mercenaries, who were struggling over the pit traps to the stockade. He watched one group, who had reached the barricade, start to chop down on the cords that held them together. On the other side, the Strigany hacked at them, their makeshift weapons jabbing through the stockade.

"I don't understand why there are so few men," Blysedden mused, as he watched one rare example loosing and reloading his steel crossbow with a mechanical efficiency.

"They've probably all run off," Vespero said. "Typical Strigany."

"Bastards," Blysedden said with feeling. The thought of so much bounty slipping through his fingers made him clench his fists, and, when the clerk started pulling at his sleeve, he lashed out, suddenly enough to catch the damn fool a blow to the side of the head.

"Actually," Vespero said, as the clerk stumbled away, "I think you had better look at this." Long before the signal rockets had gone up, Lumpen Croop had given his orders. He didn't need to repeat them.

His company's breakfast of cold pies and cured mutton had been all very well, but a morning like this really called for porridge.

Hot and honeyed, the halfling thought as he watched his two best men get the fire beneath their cauldron going, with lashings of cream.

The rest of his company watched the cauldron in between watching the advance of the infantry towards the Striganies' encampment. Soon the fire had grown strong enough to bring the water to the boil. Croop slung his bow over his shoulder, and went to oversee this most vital of operations. One of the cooks was standing on the small stepladder beside the cauldron, and, whilst his mate held it, he poured in an entire sack of oats.

"Not too many at once," Croop told him, quite unnecessarily, "and don't forget to stir in the honey after it's stopped boiling."

"Right you are, Lumpen," the cook said.

By the time the oats had boiled into a rich, creamy mess, the first companies of advancing mercenaries had discovered the Striganies' pit traps. The air was filled with their shouts of surprise and screams of agony. Not that the sounds held the halflings' attention for long. After all, the air was also filled with the smell of boiling porridge, and, suddenly, the rich smell of warm honey.

"That's right," Croop said, licking his lips in approval, as, with a practiced flourish, the cook upended a huge pot of honey over the cauldron.

The cook needed no encouragement as he twisted the jar to ease out the last ripple of honey. Then, he handed the pot down and started stirring. Not a single halfling in the company had eyes for anything other than the fire-blackened cauldron, and the cook who stood above it. As he stirred the honey into the porridge, he looked like a priest gazing into the oracle of some primitive religion.

"How does it look?" Croop asked the cook, who, with an artist's flare for timing, made his comrades wait for a while before tapping the side of the cauldron with his ladle.

"Looks ready to me," he said. "Anybody hungry?"

In the rush to the cauldron, Croop only maintained his position as first amongst equals by the judicious use of his elbows and knees. His weapons were quite forgotten, replaced by the bowl that he carried on his belt.

"There you go, captain," the cook said, ladling out a great dollop of the porridge. It smelt perfect, Croop thought, as he worked his way out of the scrum. Somehow, the hint of wood smoke combined with the honey to add something special to the taste of camp porridge.

It was only after he had licked his bowl clean that he noticed the red flag, which was supposed to be the archers' signal, waving from the top of the hill. Then he heard the hiss of the other companies'

arrows, and realised that they were supposed to be firing too.

He cursed and looked around. His lads were busily wolfing down their breakfasts. Apart from the sound of spoons scraping bowls, and polite belches, the company was silent. It was certainly inactive.

Croop watched the cloud of arrows disappear into the Striganies' stockade, and listened to the screams that floated back out. With a last regretful look at the cauldron, he slung his bowl back on his belt, shoved his spoon into his boot and unlimbered his bow.

"Right then, lads," he called out, nocking an arrow to the string, "time to start earning our bacon."

"There's bacon, too?" one of them asked hopefully. Croop glared at him, but the cook just shook his head.

"No bacon," he said, "but look at all those birds. Be lucky if some of our arrows found their way into them, wouldn't it?"

As one, the three dozen halflings looked up at the wheeling flock of birds above. Their martial spirit flared into life, and, all of a sudden, their bows were drawn, and their eyes were beady as they aimed up into the sky.

Croop was proud of their common sense.

"We'll fire with the next volley," he decided. "Might as well make it look good. Ready? Then—"

Croop stopped, although his mouth remained open. In a single moment, the mighty flock above him had disintegrated, its formation lost in a sudden downward swoop of a thousand feathered bodies. The birds plummeted towards the mercenaries, their bodies thick as fog as they homed in on the companies of archers below.

Unnerved by the bizarre behaviour, Croop remained paralysed for another second. Then he shrugged. Whatever the reason, the birds' suicidal behaviour ultimately meant just one thing: more meat for the pot.

"Fire!" he called, sweeping his hat down. All around him, his lads' bowstrings strummed and skewered birds started to fall, thumping onto the ground like grisly apples from some bloody tree.

Even though the halflings' arrows flew true, there were more birds than marksmen. Before they could manage even one more volley, the birds were upon them, pecking and scratching, and clawing at eyes and arteries with a murderously effective instinct.

Without wasting time to wonder how this could be happening, Croop grabbed at one of his attackers, a raven with talons as big as an eagle's, and wrung its neck. The vertebrae snapped, and, fighting the urge to stow the bird safely in his satchel, Croop twisted away from a flurry of pecks that would have blinded him. He lashed out, his fist thwacking into a ball of feathers, and, using his forearm to defend his face, he drew his short sword and started laying about him.

Around him, his company was in confusion. Beneath the avian assault, it was every halfling for himself. Only the fact that they fought with the abandon of natural poultrymen saved them. Soon, the air was filled with bloody feathers and the ground was littered with the twitching bodies of crippled birds.

As suddenly as the attack had come, Croop realised that it had ended. The carnage had been terrible. Feathered carcasses lay broken and fluttering all around. A few of his lads were cut, and one, wailing as he clutched his face, hadn't been quick enough to save his eye.

Croop staggered around, taking in the scene, and peering after the surviving birds. Whatever madness had driven them into the attack seemed to have been broken, although, not two hundred feet distant, he could see that another company of archers was still lost beneath a chaotic blizzard of squawking birds, their talons red with victory.

Beyond them, Croop could see that a militia company had broken. The men were fleeing into the blasted heath of this cursed place, their attackers still chasing them, and descending upon any who fell.

"What in the Gardens of the Moot was that?" the cook asked, wiping blood from his forehead, and coming to stand beside his captain. Croop just shook his head.

"I don't know," he said, "but we might as well get plucking. Wings for a stew and breasts for pies, do you think?"

"Yes, captain," the cook replied, and, impressed as always by the martial genius of his leader, he began to organise the butchery. "That's it. All of you, that is enough. We have finished with the flock. We can do no more with it."

Dannie heard the voice through the fog of his trance. It had come over him gradually as he had chanted, this trance, blotting out the feeling of the ground beneath his crossed legs, and replacing it with the feeling of air beneath his wings.

"Open your eyes. Wake up."

He obeyed, blinking open his eyes. He half expected to see the wide panorama of the heath spread out beneath him and his flock, or, maybe, the pale, upturned targets of the egg stealers' faces. As it was, all he saw was the muddy ground of the amphitheatre, and the gathering of petrus and other apprentices.

He waited for the feeling of vertigo to pass, and then flexed his wings... his arms. He opened his mouth, and a squawk came out. He tried again. He felt horribly detached from his body, as though it were an ill-fitting suit of clothes that had been made for somebody else.

"Petru Engel?" he called, coughing to clear his throat.

"He's already gone," a woman said. Dannie turned to find an old woman sitting behind him. Her face was as wrinkled as an elephant's

hide, although her eyes were as clear as ice. She was familiar, although his head was still too full of the flutter of wings and the clenching of talons to place her.

"I know you," he said, his voice sounding strange in his ears.

The crone smiled, wide enough to reveal her remaining teeth.

"You know my darling Chera," she corrected. "Me, you just glanced at."

"Chera." Dannie said the name as if it were part of some charm. In a way, he supposed, it was. "Where is she?"

"She's fighting on the perimeter."

For the first time, Dannie heard the noises of the battle beyond: the screams, the cries, and the thunk of steel in flesh, wood and bone.

He leapt to his feet, and then staggered to one side in a fit of dizziness. The crone grabbed his elbow with surprisingly strong fingers.

"Don't worry," she said, wining. "Chera's a good girl. She'll make it back. Now, help an old woman to the inner stockade. I may be of some small help when the killing starts."

She smiled up at Dannie with a cold ferocity that reminded him of the Old Father. He shuddered, and then, he helped her to help him towards the ramparts of the inner stockade. As they arrived, some of the children rushed past them from the abandoned ramparts of the outer stockade.

"Are they through?" Dannie asked one, grabbing him by the scruff of the neck. The youngster, who was perhaps eight years old, nodded. His clothes were bloodstained, and his teeth were chattering with nerves, but there was a fierce pride in his eyes.

"Yes, petru, they're through. Wait until my dad gets to them, though. Then they'll be sorry."

Dannie nodded, and, letting the child go, made his way to a post behind the barricades of the inner stockade.

Later, Dannie would wonder if it was just a coincidence that, when he turned around, he found himself next to Chera. Somehow, he doubted it. Apart from anything else, the crone whom he had escorted had been the very picture of smugness as the two had met.

"Hello," Dannie said, looking at Chera and wishing that he could think of something else to say. In the midst of battle, she looked even lovelier than ever. Her eyes were bright, and her chest was heaving. Dannie watched it heave, and then, tearing his eyes away, he saw that she was watching him with a cautious smile. Even the spattering of blood, bright red on her linen tunic, seemed perfectly placed, the flash of colour a perfect accompaniment to her fair complexion.

"Hello," Chera said back, her flushed cheeks becoming even rosier as she fiddled with her billhook. "I saw what you did with those birds.

It was wonderful. We'd have all been killed by archers if you hadn't done it."

Dannie heard the adoration in her voice, and his back straightened. All of a sudden, his head cleared of the last, fluttering uncertainties. He knew exactly who he was, and what he had to do.

"Thank you," he said, "but what use would I have been if you had not defended the outer stockade?"

"That's fallen now," Chera said, lowering her eyes modestly.

"That was the plan," Dannie said. "I'm glad that you're here with me."

"Me too," Chera said.

The two looked at each other, no longer shy. Then an arrow zipped between them, and they turned to see the rush of mercenaries that were approaching through the abandoned caravans beyond.

They were Estalian, and Dannie saw that there was more of the bull about these swarthy men than just the gold-plated ox skull of their totem. They were stocky, almost as burly as dwarfs beneath their leather armour and black capes, and their heads were lowered as they charged. Even their war cry, a deep, ululating bellow, was bovine, and the twin sabres they carried were held outstretched, the tips as wide apart as those of a bull's horns.

Dannie glanced across at Chera. She reached over and squeezed his hand. It was the first time that they had touched. Dannie grinned, happy and invincible, and, at that moment, the Estalians hit the barricade. "It's sorcery," Vespero decided. His second in command had joined him, and the two Tileans stood, side by side, as they watched the archers fleeing beneath the flocks of birds.

"I don't remember any mention, of sorcery in the contract, captain," the second in command said to Vespero, making sure that his voice was loud enough for Blysedon to hear.

Blysedon, however, wasn't listening.

"No," Vespero agreed, "there wasn't any mention at all."

The Tileans paused and watched one of the archers, tiny with distance, trip over his own feet. Something that might have been a vulture landed on him, and soon it was joined by other birds. Even at this distance, their reddening beaks made the archer's fate clear.

"Hardly an acceptable way of doing business with professional men like us," Vespero's deputy mused, and his captain looked at him, his dark features expressionless.

As one, the two Tileans turned and started to count. They counted how many of their men stood on the hill. They counted how many of their commander's men, the handful of soldiers he had taken from Aver-land's keep, remained. Then they smiled.

Vespero decided that the sight of the feasting vulture below was

good omen. Defeat held out as many possibilities as victory, and, often, quite a lot more. They would just have to make sure that they kept some of Blysedén's men alive to dig up the pay chest for them.

"Sigmar curse that filthy Strigany magic," Blysedén muttered, peering through his telescope, "but those cowards can be damned if they think that I'm paying them after this. They're only birds, after all."

Vespero looked at his second-in-command, who tipped a wink to another man. Suddenly, all of the Tileans' hands seemed to be on their sword hilts, and each of Blysedén's men seemed to be surrounded.

"Ah, wait. Wait, there it is! We've broken the Striganies' line," Blysedén exulted. "Look at them run."

Vespero frowned as he saw the collapse of the Striganies' stockade. The defenders were in full flight, pursued by victorious mercenaries into the tangled depths of their makeshift city.

He tried to hide his disappointment as he lifted his hand from his sword hilt and contemplated a future in which his company would have to make do with the meagre spoils of victory, rather than the riper consolations of defeat.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Grab a bull by the balls and the rest of it will follow.”

– Strigany aphorism At first, Mihai had complained bitterly about the task that he had been given. The plan was of Petru Engel’s devising, and although Mihai’s father had been in the wagon at the time, the petru had given him his orders. The Kazarkhan, newly appointed and newly washed, had merely listened, while the chirurgeon set his broken bones.

Mihai had remained silent too, until Engel had finished. Then he had complained, long and loudly. It wasn’t just that he was afraid of missing the main battle, and his chance to shine in front of Chera, but because he knew, he just knew, that jokes about his task would follow him for years to come.

Brock, sweating with the pain of his treatment, had waited until Mihai finished talking. Then he looked up at his son with an expression that asked why he was still there, and the conversation had finished.

Mihai, cursing all the while, had returned to his caravan to round up the twins, and together they had scouted around the corrals.

They had found six horses to their liking. Despite the hardships of the past months, they were fit and healthy. They were also ready for what needed to be done. Together, the three men had camouflaged themselves and their animals with sackcloth and ashes. Then they had slipped away into the night.

Now, with the distant roar of the battle drifting through the fading afternoon light, Mihai lay on the lip of the hollow where they were hiding, scanning the heath around them. The road was to his left, slightly raised above the sinking dampness of the rest of the place. It disappeared around the hillock that lay between here and Flintmar, and Mihai was watching the men who were moving on top of it. They had been easy to spot: their uniforms were the brightest thing in this drab place, and their armour shone, even without any sunlight. A single pavilion tent stood in their midst, and a pennant hung limply down from a flag pole.

Mihai frowned, and put them out of his mind. He hadn’t been sent out here to deal with these people, whoever they were.

The sound of hoof beats dragged his attention in the other direction, and he peered back down the road. Here was his prey. He slithered back down to the muzzled horses, and smiled at the twins.

“I think we’re in business,” he told them.

The two of them exchanged a worried look. “What do you think people will say if they find out what we’ve been up to?” Bran asked.

“Why do you even want to think of it?” Boris asked him. “They won’t need your help to mock us.”

“He’s right,” Mihai agreed. “We’ll just tell everybody that the petru sent us on a secret mission.”

The three thought about this. None of them looked particularly happy.

“I reckon Engel sent us as a punishment for following him to see the Old Father,” Boris said.

“You did not see the Old Father,” Bran said, correcting him, “neither of us did.”

“Believe me,” Mihai said, with a shudder, “you’re lucky. Now, are we going to get on with this or not?”

“What choice do we have?” the twins chorused.

“None,” he told them, and he wriggled back up to watch the approaching horsemen. The barest hint of a breeze ruffled the feathers that adorned the poles they wore on their backs. Behind him, Mihai heard his own horses stir, struggling against their harnesses and whinnying into their muzzles.

“Better go and calm them down,” one of the twins hissed, so Mihai slithered back down into the hollow. He closed his eyes, and softly began to chant. It worked. The horses grew still. Their patience, however, was a fragile thing. Mihai could feel it, even as he sang to them. They were driven by forces that were more powerful than any Strigany charm, however well sung. It was always the same when this season was upon them.

It was a relief when the cavalry passed them and it was time to go.

“How do you know there’s only one squadron here?” Boris asked.

“Or that another isn’t waiting for us up the road?” Bran added.

“I don’t,” Mihai admitted. “We’ll just have to take the petru’s word for it.”

Without giving them a chance to argue, he unbound the legs of his second mare, vaulted onto the back of the first, and prepared to lead them into action. Captain Vassily Chuikov stood in his stirrups and turned to look back down the twin columns of his lancers. The sight of them filled his heart with pride. Their cuirasses were polished to silver perfection. The pale ash hafts of their lances were held at perfect, matching angles. Most splendid of all were the feathers of their backpoles, fluttering in the breeze as constant reminders of their victories.

Most of all, Chuikov was proud of his horses. Most cavalry companies rode mares or geldings, stolid beasts that were little better than draft animals. Not him and his comrades, though, not anymore. After the war in the north, they had invested some of their riches in a

herd of white stallions. They were magnificent beasts, which they had trained in the arts of war, so that the steel crescents of their hooves were almost as deadly as the Kislevites' lances.

Chuikov's chest swelled with pride as he examined his company. Then, seeing that they were in position, he prepared to order a halt.

That's when it happened. Before he could give the order, for the first time since he had left the training ring, his mount stopped without permission. Worse, it started to pull to one side.

Chuikov looked down at his horse in surprise. Then, he adjusted his seat and tugged gently on one rein. The horse turned back to face forward, although, to Chuikov's acute embarrassment, not in time to stop the disruption to their formation that his sudden halt had caused.

He glanced up at the hill where Blysedden was camped. Despite the reassuring thought that the damned peasant wouldn't know good horsemanship if it bit him on the buttock, Chuikov felt his cheeks redden.

"Walk on," he told his horse, and it did, for a while. Then it stopped, veered to one side, and started to turn back the way it had come. Its ears went straight up, and it made a strange snuffling sound.

"Walk on," Chuikov snapped, and this time he used his spurs as well as his reins. His horse jumped and meandered forward a little more.

Lost in his consternation, it was only now that Chuikov realised the wider mutiny that was taking place among the company's horses. Some were twisting their necks and chewing at their bits, whinnying unhappily. One was doing a sort of awkward side step, torn between whatever had seized its heart and the sting of its rider's spurs.

Then, even as Chuikov felt his horse turn again, one of his companion's steeds reared up onto its hind legs and jinked its shoulders. Only the fact that its rider was a Kislevite, born in the saddle and raised on mare's milk, saved him from falling.

"By the Tsarina, what's going on?" Chuikov asked. His second-in-command answered, from the back of a horse that was bucking up and down in an attempt to throw him.

"It's almost as if-" he began, and then cursed as he bit his tongue. "We haven't passed another horse for miles, but it's almost as if they can smell-"

"Oh Ulric," Chuikov swore, cutting him off, "they can!"

He had let his horse turn to face the direction it wanted, and, sighted between its ears like a target over a cannon's barrel, he could see what had filled their steeds with such mutinous confusion.

There were six of the blasted things. Drab, brown, muddy carthorses that probably weren't worth much more than the price of their meat.

Then the wind changed, and even Chuikov could smell six mares in heat.

To the stallions, the smell was maddening, an aphrodisiac that burst through their training like a flooding river through a dam. As one beast, they turned, and, oblivious to the sting of their riders' spurs and the tug of their bridles, they galloped after the objects of their desire.

The mares, like well-raised females everywhere, made a show of galloping away from them.

As the stampede turned off the road, and led off into the leg-snapping chaos of the heath, Chuikov gave up trying to control his steed, and concentrated on hanging on. He knew that they should have stuck to geldings. "What are those fools doing?" Blysedden asked. He had turned to see that, about a mile behind his vantage point, the cavalryman Chuikov's formation was disintegrating on the road they were supposed to be guarding.

Blysedden swore, glancing around to see Tubs. The scribe had wisely made himself scarce, so Blysedden contented himself with punching one fist into the palm of his hand.

After an entire day of watching his army claw its way towards the heart of the Striganyes' encampment, his nerves were drawn as tight as bowstrings. It wasn't that he was concerned about victory. Despite the sorcery, and the deceit of the Strigany, the fact remained that his followers were soldiers, and they were fighting civilians. Their victory was assured.

No, what worried him was that, as night drew ever closer, a lot of the Strigany might escape. Now that his cavalry had left the road out of Flintmar wide open, such an escape seemed ever more likely.

"Looks like the Kislevites are running away," Vespero said with a casual insouciance that Blysedden felt was almost offensive.

"They are," he said, and cursed. "They are running away."

Chewing his lips, he watched as one of the horses collapsed. The confusion of white hair, coloured feathers and polished steel disappeared into a patch of bog, and, by the time they had struggled back out of it, horse and rider were indistinguishable brown blobs.

"Strigany sorcery, I'll be bound," Blysedden said, and chewed his lip. He was already wondering if this was going to be quite as easy as he had assumed.

"Perhaps," Vespero allowed. "Although these Kislevites... Well, between you and me, commander, they are a flighty people. It's the snow that does it. Bad for the liver."

Blysedden spared a moment to glare at the Tilean. Then he called for his telescope, and looked once more at the closing net that the rest of his army had formed around the Strigany encampment. It wasn't as

tight as it might have been. The militia companies in particular were a mess. They huddled together in great masses, the gaps between their ranks wide enough to provide perfect escape routes, if night came before the battle was finished.

It was time to finish it.

"We'll have to use another unit to block the road," he muttered.

"Allow me and my men to volunteer," Vespero said.

Blysedon was tempted, but prudence prevailed. He didn't want to be left alone with only a dozen bodyguards between him and the enemy.

"No, I will need you here, captain," he said. "It looks as though I will have to use my reserves after all. Signaller!" By the time they had turned back onto the road, Mihai and his comrades were muddled, battered and bruised. They had been constantly forced to leap off their horses, to help them out of patches of bog, or through tangled chokes of brambles. What made it even worse was that, as soon as the mares had smelled the stallions, their will to flee from their pursuers had drained away.

"I don't know, Gertie," Mihai told one of his horses, as he pulled her reluctantly up the bank that led back onto the road, "sometimes I wonder if you're quite the lady I thought you were."

The horse whinnied indignantly and the twins, who had also dismounted to help their mares up the slope, laughed.

"I'm sure that the petrus will have something to say about the morals of the modern foal," Boris said, a mare's bridle in each fist.

"For, have not our people always survived by the strength of their character?" Bran intoned in a passable imitation of Petru Engel.

Mihai grinned, white teeth shining through the patchwork of spattered mud and scratches that patterned his face. He had reached the top of the bank, and the dirt road beyond was one of the most beautiful things he had ever seen. He swung back up onto his mare's back, and looked out over the bog.

The Kislevites were still following them. Not that they had much choice in the matter. The mercenaries had long since given up trying to control their mounts, although most of them had managed to hold their seats. That, Mihai thought, was quite some achievement, considering the lust-fuelled desperation of the stallions' pursuit.

"They're a sorry sight," Bran said as he joined Mihai.

"Like cockerels caught in a storm," Boris agreed. "Look at the state of those feathers."

"Maybe," Bran mused, "we should stay here and pluck them? If they are struggling up the slope, and we are waiting for them..."

Mihai shook his head.

"No, there are too many, and don't underestimate them. How

many people do you know that could have stayed on their horses through all of that, let alone maintained some sort of formation?"

"Not many," Bran agreed. He was looking at the Kislevites' captain. The man's uniform was as torn and filthy as any beggar's, but his authority remained untouched. Even as his mount leapt over a clump of tangled bushes, and staggered to one side, the captain's back remained straight. As soon as he recovered the breath that had been knocked out of him, he barked a fresh set of commands that had the scattered riders dragging their reluctant horses back into formation.

Mihai watched the riders as they tried to give some sort of form to their stampeding stallions. Then, something in the tangled expanse that separated him from his pursuers caught his eye. It wasn't much, just a flash of colour against the drab browns of the heath, but it was enough to quicken Mihai's pulse.

He looked again at the approaching Kislevites. Suddenly, their advance didn't seem so slow, or the distance between him and them so great. On the other hand, if fortune had offered him this gift, then it would be wrong to turn it down, insulting, even.

"Here, hold my horses," he told Bran, tossing him the reins.

"Where are you going?" he asked. Mihai, who had already vaulted out of his saddle, spared him a quick glance.

"Just wait here for a minute," he said, and, with a sudden white grin, he turned and rushed towards the Kislevites.

"Where are you going?" the twins bellowed in unison.

Mihai ignored them. It was hard work running through the heath. Mud sucked at his feet, and brambles ripped angrily at his clothes and the skin beneath. Despite the chill of the day, sweat trickled down his spine, and his breath grew shorter and more ragged.

From time to time, he looked up to keep his bearings, and to see how close the Kislevites had come. Down here, mired in the undergrowth, they seemed a lot closer than they had from the road.

No, he thought. They don't seem closer, they are closer.

He forced himself to run, ignoring the barbs of the undergrowth. For a moment, he was seized with the terrible thought that he had gone off track, and missed his objective. It would be easy enough to do. It was such a small thing in the vastness of this wilderness.

Then he saw it, and, when he did, he knew that the risk he had taken was well worthwhile.

He didn't know what the flower was called. He had never seen one like it before. It was a magnificent bloom, though. The petals made a sunburst of colour, from the pale yellow of the tips to the fiery oranges of their bases. It was as wide as two open palms, and perfect, not a single insect bite or patch of blight on any of the petals.

Mihai drew his knife and sliced through the stem. As he bent over

the bloom, he caught the scent, a heady musk that smelled better than any perfume he had ever smelled. For a moment, he thought about stowing the flower in his shirt to hide it from the twins.

He paused, hesitated. Then he caught sight of a Kislevite's back pole, the feathers fluttering not more than a couple of dozen yards away, and he came to a decision.

Holding the stem of the flower between his teeth, he turned and ran.

As he drew nearer to the embankment and the road, he could hear the twins cheering him on. His legs felt as though they were on fire, and every step was agony. Even so, he raced up the broken ground of the embankment, as though he were sprinting along the road, and crawled inelegantly back into his saddle.

"What the hell is that between your teeth?" Boris asked.

"Let's go," Mihai said out of the corner of his mouth, and, turning his horse with his knees, he galloped off down the road. As he did so, he tried to think of an explanation for the flower which he still held between his teeth.

The horses' hoof beats drummed a steady rhythm into the packed earth, and, after the sweating confusion of the bog, all three felt their spirits lift. After half a mile, they turned, and, seeing that the Kislevites were still struggling up onto the road, they let their horses slow.

"Before you ask," Mihai told them, taking the flower from his mouth, and stowing it carefully in his satchel, "this is for Petru Engel. It's sleepwort. He's always after it."

The twins started laughing.

"What's so funny?" Mihai scowled.

"Oh, nothing," Bran answered wiping his eyes. He turned to his brother, and the two exchanged a wink. "Anyway, I wonder how things are going back at Flint-mar?"

Their humour died, and the three of them fell silent. As they had drawn further away from the settlement, the sounds of the battle from Flintmar had grown ever fainter. The relative silence did little to encourage them, though. Their thoughts turned back to their families and friends, to everybody who had ever meant anything to them, and to the doom that was upon them.

It was Boris who broke their miserable silence.

"You saw the Kazarkhan selected by Ushoran," he said, "what else do you need to know? If our leader is chosen by a god, how can he fail? When we have needed it, victory has always been ours."

"You sound like a petru, and who's to say when we've needed it?" Bran asked. "You heard about the caravans that were wiped out on the way down here. Didn't they need victory too?"

"They were only individuals," Boris said, uncertainly, "not the whole of our people."

Bran snorted.

"Well, neither are we the whole of our people. There are Strigany in Bretonnia, Tilea, Araby, all over. If we're all slaughtered, then some of our people will still survive, somewhere."

The three men rode in thoughtful silence.

"Did you hear about that perfume maker from one of the northern caravans?" Mihai asked. "They say he blends the most subtle scents of any of our people, which is to say, of anybody: rose water that really smells of roses, incense that will cover any stink and perfumes to set a man's blood on fire. What's really amazing, though, is that all he's got is a wooden plate where his nose should be. He lost it in an ambush."

"A wooden plate? Then how does he smell?" Bran asked sceptically.

"Awful."

The twins didn't even groan at the old joke.

Mihai shrugged.

"Look, why waste time worrying? The petru said that we were to lure the cavalry off the road, so that's what we'll do. That's all we can do."

"It isn't enough," Boris explained. "We are strong. We can fight. We should... We should... What's that in the trees?"

Mihai looked up, just as his mount suddenly stopped, digging her hooves into the road. He took a quick glance back over his shoulder, and saw that the first of the Kislevites was so close that he could see the whites of his eyes. Although the man's uniform was ragged and muddy, he still held his lance high. The steel tip glittered wickedly.

Mihai licked his lips nervously, and then followed Boris' pointing finger back to the forest. The tops of the trees were crashing and swaying as if caught in some invisible storm. For one innocent moment, Mihai actually assumed that it was just the wind in the branches.

With a sudden jolt of terror, he realised that there was no wind. Beneath the slate-grey cloud, the day seemed to be holding its breath. That meant that the approaching commotion could only be one thing, or, rather, two things.

Mihai's mare whinnied in sudden terror, and started to jink back towards the approaching lancers.

"What can they smell?" Bran asked, fighting his mount as she tried to turn. The horse that he had been leading had already pulled her reins from his hand and fled, galloping back towards the approaching Kislevites.

"Oh gods," Mihai said. "It must be those damned giants."

Boris and Bran stopped struggling with their horses for long enough to give him identical expressions of horror.

“The ones you and Dannie saw?”

Mihai grunted an affirmative, and looked back down the road to the approaching horsemen. Now that they were back on solid ground, the Kislevites had bullied their stallions into the old three abreast formation, and the tips of their lances were already lowered as they thundered forward.

With a cry, Bran was thrown from his mount. He rolled and bounced back to his feet, but his mare was already gone, galloping away from the horrors that were approaching through the forest.

Not a moment too soon. As she turned tail and ran, there was a thunderous snap as a tree trunk split, and a huge moving cliff of dirty skin and mouldy rags appeared between the trees.

Mihai bit his lip as the monstrosity lurched into view ahead of them. He didn't need to turn back down the road to see that there was no escape there. So, caught between a hammer and an anvil, he gave the only order that he could.

“Dismount,” he cried, leaping off his horse. As soon as she was free, she bolted, and the three Strigany found themselves standing on the road.

“What now?” Boris asked, his eyes wide with terror as he felt the packed earth of the road beating with the impact of the giants' footsteps.

“Hide,” said Mihai, but it was already too late. Before he could take a step, the last stand of trees at the edge of the forest parted as easily as a bead curtain, and, stomping through the splintered trunks as happily as a village idiot through a field of corn, the first of the giants emerged. It belched thunderously and contentedly, and then looked down to see the three humans who stood beside the path.

The three Strigany froze beneath its gaze. For a moment, the giant's features slackened in idiot surprise. Then it blinked its dark, watery eyes and, after giving another good-natured belch, it stomped on past them.

The Strigany scurried into the undergrowth by the side of the road. They were close enough to the passing monster to see the cracks in its yellow toenails, each of which was as large as a shield, and to smell the full ammonia stench of its unwashed rags.

“There's the other one,” Bran hissed into Mihai's ear, and he turned to watch another giant following in the footsteps of the first. Its face was a blank slab of mindless indifference, but it carried a tree trunk in each hand. The crude clubs swung in rhythm with its footsteps, and it was making a deep, rumbling noise in its throat, which could have been an attempt at a marching song.

“Cheerful fellows, aren’t they?” Boris asked. Mihai said nothing. He was thinking about the destruction that these two had wrought on a forest of ancient oaks, and what would happen when they reached his people’s encampment.

He thought about his father, and Dannie, and Petru Engel. He thought about Chera. Then he tried to think of a plan, a way of stopping these two walking breathing catastrophes from falling upon his people.

As he thought, there came, like a gift from Ushoran, the key to the problem.

The giant’s handler was following his two charges on the back of an ancient-looking mule. The man’s leather coat was flapping around his knees as his mount trotted gamely forward, and the tin cone of his loudspeaker was slung on his back. He wore a sword at his side, but he was obviously more comfortable with the purse of coins that he was counting. Safe in the shadow of his charges, he remained oblivious to the rest of the world. His eyes glittered as he counted his coins.

“See him?” Mihai hissed to the twins, as the man drew level. “I think that we should ask him for a quick chat.”

“How can you think of thievery at a time like this?” Boris asked, his tone a mixture of admiration and horror.

“It’s not thievery,” Mihai hissed, “at least it’s only incidentally thievery. He’s the giants’ handler. We get him, we get them, probably.”

“Probably,” Boris repeated miserably, swapping an identical look with his twin.

“On my signal,” Mihai told them. “Go!”

The three men darted from their cover. Terror lent a frantic speed to their attack as, bent double, they sprinted towards their prey.

Bran was the first to reach him. He ignored the man, and seized his mule’s bridle, feeling the warmth of the beast’s breath on the back of his hand, as he gripped the leather. The rider squawked in surprise and fumbled to draw his sword, but, before his fingers had even properly grasped the hilt, Boris had grabbed one leg and tipped him from his saddle.

Mihai caught him as he fell, twisting the man’s arm up behind his back, and pressing a dagger into the small of his back.

“What do you want?” the man yelped, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down with fright.

“Mihai!” Bran hissed.

“We want to offer you a job,” Mihai told the man.

“Mihai!” Bran hissed again.

“In a minute,” Mihai hissed back, and then turned back to his

captive. "In fact, we want to hire you and your friends."

The man's eyes rolled in his head.

"Well, I'm flattered," he squeaked, "but we already have an employer."

"I'm sure we can beat any offers you might have received. I can offer you an intact liver, for example." Mihai smiled winningly and pressed the tip of the dagger deeper into the man's back.

"Mihai!" This time both Boris and Bran called him, and neither was whispering anymore.

"What?" Mihai snapped, turning to them. Then he saw the face of one of the giants, which had turned and now loomed over them, curiosity twisting its features. It was a horrible expression. Especially, Mihai considered, when the thing bared the rotten tombstones of its teeth.

"So," Mihai said cautiously, "as well as leaving your kidneys intact, how about we match what you've been paid already?"

The giant's handler pursed his lips.

"I don't know," he began. "Loyalty is hard to put a price on."

The giant took a single, earth-shuddering step forward.

"Name your price," Mihai said, and, despite the knife that still pressed against his ribs, the giant's handler smiled.

"First of all," he said, "how about you remove that knife from my back? Now, if you'll just let me have a word with my colleagues," he said, easing away from Mihai's knife, and unslinging the cone of his loud-hailer. "I'll have a word with them. If you don't mind, of course?"

"Be my guest," Mihai said, nodding. Then he cautiously stepped back, sheathed his knife, and waited to see if the man was as disloyal as he hoped.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Anybody can make plans. Anybody can give orders. A leader must do more than this. A leader must give hope, and he must give it even when he has none himself. After all, how can there be endurance without hope? How can there be courage? How can there be victory?”

– A Tale of Ushoran Buried in the damp and the darkness, Brock had thought that the pain would be the worst of it. Although his wounds had been dressed after the fight, he had refused the most powerful of the petru’s unguents. He knew that, today of all days, he would need his wits kept sharp, his judgement unclouded. If that meant that the agony from his smashed gristle and cracked ribs had to be left as unchecked as a fire in a burning house, then so be it.

He was, after all, Kazarkhan.

It wasn’t the pain that kept him sweating in the cold embrace of his hastily dug burrow. It was the constant, nagging fear that he had made a mistake.

There was, after all, so much that could go wrong with the plan. If the mercenaries realised that the bulk of his forces were hiding beneath their wagons, covered only by scrapes of soil and breathing tubes, there would be a massacre, Their foxholes would become graves, and the strongest among them would die without even wielding their weapons.

Then again, what if the inner stockade didn’t hold? What if he and his men burst from the ground to fall upon the rear of an army that had already slaughtered the women and children?

Brock wriggled at the thought and listened to the muted sounds of battle. Should he have left more men on the surface? Should he have put everybody behind the stockade and hoped to hold off their attackers, rather than to trap them between the hammer of his warriors and the anvil of their families’ defence? That was what many of his people had advised, during that hurried council of war the night before. If he hadn’t still been bloodied with Ushoran’s blessing, they probably would have outvoted him, too.

However, he had been bloodied with Ushoran’s blessing.

“Relax,” Brock told himself. “One way or another it will all be over soon.”

And so it was. Even as Brock heard the first whistles of the Striganies’ retreat, somebody jerked at his breathing tube, hard. He ignored the taste of blood as the thing cut his lip and concentrated on making himself lie still. Through the earth all around him, he could feel the reverberations of running feet as his people fled from the outer perimeter and stampeded past his ring of hidden men into the

sanctuary of the inner stockade.

What if they come in waves and we're caught between them?

"Then we'll fight them both," Brock muttered in the darkness, and then spat out a crumb of soil.

The rushing of feet continued, although they sounded heavier, iron-shod, or perhaps that was only his imagination. Either way, he fidgeted with the communication cord that connected him with the men hidden beneath the nearby wagons. Once he pulled, they would pass on his signal, and the ground beneath their wagons would erupt with hundreds of the Striganies' strongest fighters.

What if I give the signal too soon?

Brock waited and waited. He counted his heartbeats to try to keep some sense of time as, alone on the darkness, the seconds stretched out into infinity. For the first time, he realised how fast his heart was beating, hammering in his veins and hissing in his ears.

He swallowed dryly, and there was a crash and a cheer from above. He prayed to Ushoran that the splintering wood was that of the outer stockade, and not the inner. Images of the slaughter that would take place, if the mercenaries reached that central sanctuary, sprang unbidden to his mind, and he winced.

Brock waited until he sensed another rush of feet charging past above. Only then did he scrape away the covering of earth above him, and slowly lift his head from his bolt hole.

After so long spent in the darkness, the daylight was painfully bright. He squinted through the wheel spokes of the wagon that rested above him, trying to make sense of the noise and the rushing figures that were charging past.

Their knee-high boots and steel greaves marked them out as mercenaries. So did the sound of their exultant voices and the wild laughter of men who knew that the battle was almost over.

Brock sank back down so that only his eyes and the top of his head showed above the loose earth of his hiding place. He made no effort to count the mercenaries as they charged past his hiding place. There were too many of them. All he did was wait until the tide of them had washed past and the first sounds of the struggle on the inner barricade had begun to ring out.

Then, and only then, did he pull on the communicating cord and drag himself up out of the cold stillness of the earth. All around him, other men slithered from their hiding places, emerging from the ground like the restless dead.

From up ahead, Brock heard the clash of steel on steel, and shouted orders and curses. A woman's scream momentarily eclipsed all other sounds. It was cut off suddenly.

The Kazarkhan exchanged a glance with the nearest of his men, a

domnu he had never met until the night before. Without a word, Brock drew his cutlass and signalled the advance.

As they slipped forward to the battle ahead, he felt a tide of relief wash over him. The waiting was over, and so were the doubts. Now, there was only kill or be killed, the euphoria of victory or the merciful release of defeat. For the first time since his victory in the ring, the Kazarkhan felt at peace. Perched on the barricades, Dannie lunged forwards, to chop through the Estalian's throat with a grunt and a single, perfectly-timed, blow. He blinded another with the back stroke, opening up a deep, bloody crevasse in the front of the man's skull. He disembowelled his third victim as he tried to vault the barricade. Glistening intestines spooled from the wound, and the stink of his innards clogged Dannie's nose.

He ignored the stink, just as he ignored the animal screams of the dying man. One of the children would put the dying man out of his misery soon enough, be it with a razor blade to the jugular, or an iron to the head.

He ignored the patch of damp numbness that was spreading down his left flank, too. He supposed that he had been cut, but he couldn't remember how. He didn't have time to remember how.

Anyway, he thought as he lunged forward to reach another victim, it doesn't matter. Only Chera matters.

He snatched a glance across at his beloved, suddenly needing to see her as much as a drowning man needs air, and his heart swelled.

She was perfect, he thought, as he watched her swing her billhook against a pair of mercenaries. The way she moved was fluid with supple strength. Then there was the beauty of her face, the whiteness of her teeth and the dark flame of her hair. She was like a lioness defending her cubs.

In that moment, she turned, and their eyes met.

For a moment, Dannie stood still, stunned by her beauty. It would have been the death of him, if, warned by some instinct, he hadn't torn himself from the magnificence of her gaze, and peered back to the battle. At first, he wasn't sure what had caught his attention. Then he had it. It was a sound, a sound that was different from the screams and cries, and the clash of steel on steel.

Dodging a thrown javelin, he squinted over the melee of mercenaries in front of him. They had stopped their advance and, as their captain bellowed at them, they broke away from the barricade, and fell back.

A chorus of wild jeering broke out around Dannie, but he didn't join in. This was no victory. Although the men were falling back, they were doing so almost reluctantly.

Then Dannie saw what they were doing among the abandoned

wagons of the outer camp, and his breath caught in his throat.

"They're running," Chera exulted, her face beautiful with joy, despite the spattered blood that marked her porcelain skin.

"We've won!" somebody else called, and another cheer went up, as the last of the Estalians disappeared into the confusion of abandoned wagons.

Dannie watched, nervously, unconvinced. It wasn't until the shouted orders of the Estalians sharpened into the steady, rhythmic pulse of a galley slaves' drummer that he was sure of what they were doing.

"The wagons!" he cried, pointing at the nearest of them with a blood-smeared cutlass. "They're using the wagons."

The cheers along the Strigany line died away. Silence fell upon them, as they watched the wagons that the Estalians had seized. The men swarmed around half a dozen of them, and they were pulling them away from the inner stockade.

"So, let them steal a few wagons," somebody said.

"No," Dannie said, shaking his head. "I don't think that they're stealing them. I think that they're going to use them."

"What as?"

"As a battering ram," Chera answered, and Dannie cast her another loving look.

She was so intelligent.

He was still beaming when the Estalians paused, turned, and, with a roar of combined effort, turned to push the wagons back towards the inner stockade. As they drew nearer, the wagons moved even faster, momentum taking over.

Dannie knew the vehicles were heavy, made of solid wood. Most of them were full of food, pans, tools and what not. All that weight was running on perfectly crafted, perfectly sprung wheels. He watched the hubs of the nearest blur as its speed picked up.

"Get off the barricades," somebody said, and Dannie found himself hand in hand with Chera as they leapt from the earth bank, and sprinted away from their posts. Behind them, the wagons rattled closer, bouncing easily over the litter of corpses that lay outside the stockade, and crashing into it with a bone-splintering force.

A few of the Strigany, who had been too slow or too stubborn to leave their posts, were caught under the avalanche of careening wagons and splintered stockade. Those that survived didn't survive for long. The Estalians finished them off as they swarmed over the wreckage of the crashed wagons and into the compound beyond.

"Don't let them in," Dannie yelled, running back to the fallen barricades, cutlass blurring in a bloody arc, to meet the first of the mercenaries. Chera followed behind, and behind her came the old

men, women and children who had been defending the heart of their encampment.

They threw themselves against the attackers with the courage of the truly desperate, but, without the advantage of the barricade, the Strigany were pushed back, cut down and overwhelmed. And, they were not alone. Even among the chaos of their defeat, Dannie could hear the terrible, splintering crash of other wagons crushing through other parts of the barricade, the rest of the mercenaries obviously taking inspiration from the Estalians' success.

As even more men poured over the barricades, the melee around him collapsed into a riot of crushed bodies, packed against each other. Dannie could smell the cloves on his opponents' breaths, the stink of their sweat, and he could see the terror and exhilaration that shone in their eyes. He cut, twisted and stabbed.

He did whatever he had to in order to stay beside Chera. With their line broken, and with nowhere to run, he knew that they were both dead.

Still, he thought, with a grim fatalism, at least we can die together.

A pair of Estalians emerged from the press, coming at him from either side. He blocked the swinging cutlass blade of the first, and twisted, as the second stabbed at his midriff. This time, he wasn't quick enough, and the steel, which felt as cold as fire and as hot as ice, sliced neatly through his muscles and ground against his ribs.

Dannie grabbed the man's wrist, and brought his forehead down to crack into his face. With a crunch of gristle and a howl of pain, the Estalian staggered back, tearing his hand from Dannie's grip. Before he could strike again, he fell, and, through a confusion of falling limbs, Dannie saw the hunched form of Petru Maria, her eyes twinkling like a crow's, as she pulled her stiletto from the Estalian's back and slashed it across his throat.

Dannie had no time to witness the man's fate, however. His friend had already raised his cutlass for another strike.

It was a mistake. Before the Estalian could chop down, the melee around him surged, and he was knocked off balance. Dannie stabbed towards him, catching the man in the thigh as he was swept away.

He took a glance over at Chera, and breathed a sigh of relief that she was flanked by two of the men from her caravan.

Then, although he could hardly believe it, he felt the tide of the battle turning. He heard it in the voices of the mercenaries from the back of the melee. He felt it in their movements, and the sudden, panicked shift in their packed ranks. Then he heard the cry that began to echo through the wreckage of the abandoned camp.

One word, as terrible and as glorious now as it had been the night

before: one word that reminded him, and every other Strigany, that Ushoran was on their side.

One word to bind them all into a single, unstoppable force: "Kazarkhan."

The cry came from a thousand throats, and the mercenaries turned in panic to see what fresh enemy had fallen upon their rear. Dannie realised that he might survive today after all, and, in that moment, he began to fear. Blysedden had long since given up on his telescope. There was too much to see, too much to take in all at once, and too much to worry about.

Normally, Blysedden was not a man to worry about anything. After a lifetime of brutal measures and cold-blooded command, there was little in this world that he didn't feel capable of facing. The Strigany, however, were like nothing he'd come across before. How many times, Blysedden wondered, had they seemed to be on the verge of defeat? How many times had his troops scented victory, only to have it snatched away again?

They had trapped the Strigany within their encampment, only to have fallen into traps themselves. They had cleared the barricades with an arrow storm, just as the Striganies' foul sorcery had brought the wild birds of this cursed place raining down around them. And, just as his encirclement was tightening around the Striganies' last redoubt, like a strangler's fingers, a new army had appeared to encircle his men.

An entire new army, he thought with something close to awe, how was it possible?

Beside him, Vespero, his even features a mask of competing calculations, was wondering the same thing.

"Look at how many new men the Strigany have," he said cheerfully. "Where did they all come from, do you think?"

"They must have been hiding," Blysedden said, too concentrated on the confusion below to wonder why Vespero seemed so sanguine. From this distance, it was impossible to see if there were any real military formations left in the bloody melee. There didn't seem to be any. Here and there, mercenary banners were still held aloft, their companies huddled around them like shipwrecked sailors around the flotsam of their misfortune. There were already far fewer banners than before, Blysedden thought, a lot fewer.

He started chewing his lip.

"I don't see how the enemy could have hidden so many men," Vespero said. "There must be a thousand of them, at least, probably more. Of course, if they were Tileans they would be easier to count. They would have the pride in their appearance that makes a true warrior stand out from his surroundings, a beacon of chivalry in the

drabness of this northern squalor. I mean, look at them.”

Vespero seemed genuinely offended by the inelegance of his adversaries.

“Look at that one hacking through your men with an axe: no finesse, and no style. He works like a butcher, and he looks as though he might have been created out of mud.”

Vespero’s second-in-command, who had risen to his position through his skill with a quill rather than a sword, seized the opening.

“Even so, I am sure that a man of our commander’s experience would have spotted this outflanking manoeuvre, if it had been done without the use of magic,” he said, smoothly. “What do you think, commander? Is this more Strigany sorcery?”

Blysedden waved the question away distractedly.

“Maybe, I don’t know. By Sigmar, look at those fools on the left. They’ve abandoned their standard.” His fists clenched with frustration, and he jabbed an arm towards where one of the companies, surrounded and divided, had dropped its standard and disintegrated into a fleeing mob. Even as Blysedden watched, he saw their leader tripped and brought down. The Strigany fell upon him like a pack of terriers onto a wolf.

“Serves you right, you damned fool,” Blysedden snarled.

“It’s a shame,” Vespero sympathised. “Your planning was sound, commander. You just lacked the tools, and obviously, as the Strigany are using sorcery, our contracts are—”

“Ah, there they are,” Blysedden cried, his rage turning to savage triumph. “Look, down there, the ogres. By all the gods, those beasts are worth their weight in gold.”

“Ah yes,” Vespero said, pursing his lips, “the ogres. Good.” Dannie had no idea how long it took for the mercenaries to break between the hammer of the Strigany’s attack and the anvil of their defence. There was no sense of time, just the constant, mindless rhythm of strike and counter strike, of dodging and of stabbing, and of the burning pain of his overused muscles, which grew even brighter than that of his wounds.

There was also the knowledge that Chera was beside him, and that his life meant nothing compared to hers. Where losing his caravan had almost destroyed him, losing her certainly would.

That knowledge of it throbbed in his heart like a beacon, and he fought as fearlessly for her as she fought for him. It was one of the reasons they survived.

The other reason they survived was the dark, ragged shape of the Petru Maria, who flitted unnoticed among their attackers. Her stiletto punched in and out of unsuspecting backs relentlessly. Of the dozen men who could have caught Dannie and Chera unawares, not a single

one managed to strike his blow before the lethal agony of the crone's blade shot through their livers or kidneys or spines.

Then, it was over.

It took Dannie a while to realise that he had no enemies left, and that the men he was now facing across their tangled corpses were his own. As he recognised Brock, he dropped his guard, every muscle in his body singing with relief. He relaxed and saluted his Kazarkhan.

Brock looked the Kazarkhan too, every inch of him. He was covered in blood and mud and filth, as if birthed from the same ground that hid the Old Fathers, and the blades of his weapons were chipped and dark with gore.

More than that was the holy fire that burned in his eyes. It was so intense that Dannie stepped back from the figure that strode towards him. For a moment, he was sure that Ushoran was peering out of his skull, at the carnage that lay all around, and, in a flash of memory that seemed more real than the world around him, he remembered his own brush with the divine.

His strength bled away, suddenly and completely, and he staggered as his vision grew cloudy. Then he felt a hand on his arm, a soft hand with fingers that were delicate yet strong. He looked up, and his gaze met Chera's eyes. She was pallid after the fury of battle, and grubby with blood and filth. Still, she was as beautiful as ever, radiant even. Dannie felt his strength return as suddenly as it had left him, and the two of them gazed into each other's eyes until the boom of Brock's laughter ended the moment.

"Never mind all that now," he roared, slapping Dannie on the back. "There'll be plenty of time for canoodling when the clay's work's done. At least, if her father doesn't find out about it."

Dannie smiled at the enthusiasm of Brock's greeting, and cursed his overactive imagination. The Kazarkhan, it seemed, was still the same old bear of a man he'd always been. As to the fire in his eyes, well, it flickered in the eyes of all the men who followed him too. They were hardly recognisable, any more as the craftsmen and merchants that Dannie had come to know over the months of their exile. They were as wild as their leader, and, whether grim-faced with loss or euphoric with victory, there was no doubt of their humanity.

"Are we winning?" Dannie asked, reluctantly turning away from Chera, as he fell in behind his leader.

"Yes," Brock said. He paused, as a distant smash of timber was followed by a chorus of screams. "Although we haven't won yet."

He pointed the blade of his cutlass to the other side of the stockade. Dannie followed the gesture, in time to see another wagon hurtle up above the ragged skyline of the settlement, an impossible flight that ended some way inside the inner stockade.

“That will be the ogres,” Brock explained, leaping up onto the wreckage of the barricade. He raised his arms for silence, his well-used weapons outstretched, and addressed the great mob of men that had followed him thus far.

“Listen,” he bellowed, his voice carrying across the din of the battle that still ebbed and flowed around the mercenaries’ retreat. “We have broken most of our enemies, but not all. Those of you who are too wounded or too tired, stay here. Hold this line. Defend our backs. The rest of you,” he said, “follow me.”

Somebody cheered, and the others followed him, roaring their enthusiasm at these simple words. As one man, they followed their Kazarkhan as he barrelled through the central compound towards the ogres.

“Stay here and organise the defence,” Dannie told Chera.

“No, I have to look after you,” she said.

“Will you disobey me when I am your husband?” he asked. The words were out before he’d thought of them. Chera laughed, and their fingertips brushed against each other. Then, with a grin on his face, Dannie allowed himself to be swept away in the surge of movement that followed the Kazarkhan.

As they made their way across to the other side of the stockade, he thought about how the Kazarkhan’s speech on the barricades would grow as it was told and retold. Within a week, he guessed, Brock’s few barked instructions would have been improved into as fine a piece of rhetoric as the storytellers could come up with. Within a year, it would have become an ode, and, by the time Brock died, it would be an epic.

That, Dannie decided, was exactly as it should be. They were passing through the ranks of those who were too old or too young, or too weak, to have fought. They sat huddled around the amphitheatre, sheltered within the eye of the storm of battle. As their Kazarkhan strode through them, there was gratitude and even adoration, in every face.

If they think they have a hero now, Dannie thought, wait until the storytellers have told it. Wait until 7 have told it.

Then, he saw the first of the ogres, and all thoughts of the future evaporated beneath the intensity of the present.

It was the first time that Dannie had seen ogres, but, even though he could only snatch glances through the battle ahead, there was no mistaking their kind. The one that he briefly saw stomping down on a man had skin as grey as slate. The shifting crowd hid him, and then revealed another, arrows bouncing harmlessly off its form. To the left, a cleaver as big as a barn door briefly arched above the crowd, before chopping down.

Crushed within the ranks of his comrades, Dannie had no way of counting the ogres, but there were obviously enough of them to overwhelm all who faced them. As they ground all opposition beneath their steel-shod boots and iron-bound clubs, the noise of their assault grew ever closer.

Another inhuman roar of exertion rose above the din of battle, and another unlikely missile hurtled towards the packed Strigany. It was a handcart, oak-built and iron-bound, and, despite its weight, it spun through the air as easily as a discus.

Dannie lost sight of it as it crashed into the crowd on his right, and, suddenly, the onward rush of his comrades staggered to a halt as their front rank hit the crushing wall of the ogres' advance.

Lost in the turmoil of pushing bodies and shoving limbs, Dannie fought to keep his balance. There was a shriek from above, and all eyes turned up, in time to see as a body that had been flung back into their ranks. Then the men in front of him turned and scrabbled back, their eyes wild with fear.

Dannie, sensing their panic, tried to think of the words to calm it. He didn't have time. Before he could do anything, he was pushed forwards.

The ogre stood in front of him. It was perhaps twice as tall as a man, although swollen with the fury of battle it seemed even larger. Its face and chest were black with blood, and its teeth gleamed pinkly as it bellowed with joy. The iron-bound clubs, which it held in each hand, blurred as it swung them gleefully, and the men on either side of Dannie fell, their skulls crushed as easily as if they were rabbits.

Dannie screamed as he lunged forwards, his cutlass cutting up in a disembowelling blow. He realised, too late, that, beneath the mud and the gore, the ogre's stomach was covered with an armour plate as big as a steel cauldron.

His blade hit the armour with an arm-numbing impact that tore it from his fingers. Unarmed and exposed, Dannie tried to scramble back, but to no avail. The press of bodies behind him was too great. So, instead of going back, he went forwards, dropping to his knees and rolling between the ogre's legs.

It was then, unarmed and surrounded, that he caught his first sight of the giants that lurched forward to tower over the battlefield, and, in that moment, he knew that his people were doomed. Vespero had always counted himself a lucky man. He had been born in the greatest city of the greatest civilisation the world had ever seen; not the largest or most powerful, perhaps, but certainly the greatest. He had been blessed with a profile as fine as any imagined by even the greatest of sculptors, in his own estimation, at least. As to his skill with the rapier, that most noble of weapons, he was second to none,

even to those who occasionally bested him. After all, everybody was unwell from time to time, even if they didn't realise it.

However, perhaps his most fortunate attribute was the unerring instinct he had for fleeting opportunity. He could sense the changing winds of fortune that blew through the Old World as well as a leviathan can smell prey even in the blackest depths of the ocean.

Which was just as well. Today, he had needed to be aware of every subtlety, every nuance of the battle that was unfolding below. More than once, he had been tempted to give the order that would have ended their contract and their commander both. Yet, even though the thought of the pay chest that awaited him was alluring, he had resisted. The time had not been right.

As he felt the thump of the giants' marching feet, he knew that he had been wise to be cautious. From what he knew of their kind, their stupidity often took the form of loyalty to their paymaster.

Vespero watched them as they ambled past, the grotesque heads as high as the hill upon which he stood. They were dirty, inelegant, clumsy and perfectly suited, he thought, to this awful country.

He sighed as he watched them lumbering towards the ruins of the Striganies' encampment. Here and there, groups of fleeing mercenaries scurried away from their advance, flushed from amongst the detritus of the battle like partridges from a field of wheat.

Vespero's disappointment at his side's impending victory found expression in his contempt for his fleeing comrades. To flee from a battle was one thing, but to do so empty-handed?

"Barbarians," he muttered.

"More than that," Blysedon told him.

For a moment, Vespero wondered what his commander was talking about. Then he realised that it must be the giants.

He scowled. To use such abominations was exactly the sort of ungentlemanly thing he would have expected in the Empire, of course, but even so. Apart from anything else, they were surely marked with Chaos.

"By Sigmar," Blysedon exulted as the first of the monstrosities stepped easily over a section of the outer barricade, "imagine having that beast bearing down on you. And look, the ogres are still pressing in from the other direction. I don't know why I bothered to hire any men at all."

Vespero bridled.

"If you had allowed us to go into battle-" he began stiffly, but Blysedon wasn't paying attention.

"Who are those people around the giant's handler?" he asked, his jubilation beginning to fade, as a sudden, terrible suspicion seized him. "I offered the damned man an escort, but he refused. Clerk.

Clerk! Where's my damned telescope?"

That was when Vespero smelled it, the delicious, delightful scent of Ranald's favour. It took a sensitive nose to detect it, especially through the blood and filth of the battlefield, but Vespero had the gift.

A slow smile spread across his face, and he turned to his second-in-command. No words passed between them. None needed to. The twinkle in Vespero's eye was enough to convey the order to get ready.

"Look at them run," Blysedon said, trying to sound cheerful, but failing miserably. Vespero looked, and some of the Strigany were indeed running. The giants, though, paid no more attention to them than they had to the fleeing mercenaries. It was the ogres they seemed intent on.

"Who are those men around the giants' handlers?" Vespero asked Blysedon.

"They must be volunteers," he answered uneasily.

Vespero nodded.

The giants stepped over the inner stockade. They dwarfed the ogres, who, oblivious to the reinforcements coming up behind them, continued to chew through the Striganies' ranks.

"In Tilea, we have a saying," Vespero said, as one of the ogres turned and bellowed a greeting to the giant behind it.

"What?" Blysedon muttered. He watched the giant lift its club, and suddenly felt as though he was a gambler watching a roulette wheel.

"Yes," Vespero said, nodding, "we say that to outrun a lion you don't have to run faster than the lion."

The giant swung its club down. The length of timber blurred as it blitzed down, and then exploded in a mass of bloodied splinters, as it cracked open the ogre's skull. The creature collapsed without a sound, and, before its comrades knew of the twenty feet of treachery that was upon them, it struck again, smashing its second club on another ogre skull.

"To outrun the lion, you just have to run faster than the other man it's chasing."

Recognising the signal, Vespero's men pounced. The dozen men from Averland's household, whom Blysedon had kept as bodyguards, spun around to face their erstwhile comrades, but they didn't stand a chance. Against the speed and viciousness of the Tileans' attack, they fared little better than fumbling peasants. Razor-sharp rapiers blizzarded through the air, arcs of arterial blood spouted from severed arteries and the remains of lost limbs, and, even as Blysedon remained glued to his telescope, the last of his men had fallen to Vespero's company.

"Sigmar curse them," Blysedon whispered, oblivious to the

carnage that had taken place around him. He was too focused on the battlefield below.

The first of the giants, its clubs destroyed, looked pleased to have done away with such sophisticated technology. The loss of its weapons certainly did little to stop its onslaught. Blysedon watched as it picked one of the ogres up, snapped its neck as easily as a chicken's, and then took a bite out of it for good measure. Satisfied with its work, the giant looked down at another, who swung a cleaver at its legs as though it were a lumberjack felling a tree.

The giant seemed not to notice the terrible wound that must surely have reached its bone. Nor did it seem to notice the loss of blood. Instead, it concentrated on lifting the ogre from its feet, fingers finding purchase in the sockets of the thing's eyes, and hurling it across the battlefield.

"Blysedon," Vespero said.

For the first time since the attack had begun, the Tilean's voice commanded Blysedon's attention. There was an edge in it, a dangerous edge. Blysedon left his telescope, and turned to look at the captain. Then he looked beyond him to the dead bodies of the elector count's men, and the hungry expressions of Vespero's own.

"En garde," Vespero said.

It didn't take Blysedon more than a moment to take in the situation: the dead Averlanders, and the victorious Tileans, their rapiers red, and their eyes alive with greed. Another man might have panicked, might have tried to fight or run, or reason.

Not Blysedon; he reacted to his rapidly changing circumstances with the lightning reflexes of a falling cat, twisting to land on its feet.

"En garde indeed," he said, pretending to misunderstand. "All is lost here, and we can only hope to withdraw and reorganise. Menheer Vespero, I would like to offer you and your company a bonus of half the paychest to escort me back to our lord's demesne."

Vespero blinked, his mind racing. Half the pay chest would be riches enough, or, to put it another way, half the pay chest would be worth losing in order to avoid becoming fugitives.

He smiled, ran a silk handkerchief down the blade of his rapier to clean it, and bowed to Blysedon.

"We would be honoured," he said.

Blysedon smiled, hiding the rage that had already started to boil up inside him at the Tileans' treachery, and went over to the tent. The clerk was cowering inside, a blanket over his head. Blysedon lifted it with the tip of his sword.

"Still got that shovel?" he asked.

The clerk whimpered an affirmative.

"Then get digging," Blysedon told him, gesturing towards the

earth where the chest had been hidden. “If ever there was a time for a strategic withdrawal, it’s now.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“A king is a king though he wears a beggar’s coat.”

– Old World saying The baron liked to think that that he was a sophisticated man. He wore underbreeches, even when it wasn’t snowing. He drank his wine with water in it. He never spat indoors unless he needed to, and when he went to the fighting pit it was only ever to watch animals.

However, the baron believed that the very hallmark of his civilised nature was in the company he kept. Eager to please maidservants may have been good enough for his father, the old rascal, but not for him. Instead, he kept a fine Tilean mistress in a house in the town, an activity paid for by the taxes of a hundred of the baron’s peasants.

Esmerelda Dolacita Fangollini, she called herself, and the baron believed her. She claimed to be a disinherited princess too, although he was a little more sceptical about that, not that he ever told her so, or that she ever stopped trying to prove it. She even had the word *Deshéritato* tattooed onto the small of her back, just above the cleft of her perfectly rounded, perfectly white buttocks. The baron had spent many a happy moment reading the word, and had learned it by heart.

This afternoon, he was engaged in another lesson in the Tilean dialect. He and Esmerelda were lying naked on her bed, entwined with each other, and with the silk sheets. The glass tubes of half a dozen oil lamps glowed with a warmth that turned her white skin golden brown, and made her hair glisten as though it were made of living onyx. The scented oil of the lamps mingled with the smell of her perfume and their sweat, and, from outside, the distant noises of the town drifted through her shuttered windows.

The baron smiled as she prattled on. Despite the fact that she had spent the last few meetings trying to teach him the Tilean for “diamond necklace”, something that he was beginning to fear was a hint, he was a contented man.

“Colier de diamante,” she repeated, brushing back her hair so that he could see how her lips formed the words.

“Calor dente,” he said.

“No, no, no. That’s not it. You also have to roll the r, like this,” she said, rolling the r, and the baron wondered vaguely how she kept her teeth so perfectly white. “Now you try.”

The baron tried, but the best that he could manage was the guttural, choking sound of a man trying to swallow a frog.

“Barbarian,” Esmerelda said, frowning. The baron reached down and tweaked her cheek, and she screamed most delightfully.

“Bastard.”

“I thought I was a barbarian.”

“You’re both.”

“If you insist.” He rolled her off him and, as she pretended to struggle, he seized both of her ankles and pulled her back towards him.

“Get off me, you swine!” she said, almost as though she meant it, and her eyes flashed with the fire that the baron loved so well and paid so dearly for.

“Colier de diamante,” he said, his pronunciation perfect.

“Oh darling,” Esmerelda cooed, and her struggles became more purposeful and more professional.

Afterwards, the two of them lay on the bed exhausted.

“I’m going to wash,” Esmerelda said at last, “and get that lazy old woman Agatha to bring us some food. What do you want, my darling? I think that we have some honeyed pigs’ trotters.”

“Fine,” the baron said, slapping her rump playfully as she got out of bed. “Bring some wine, too. Oh, and get her to give my guards something too, would you? Bread and ale should do them.”

“As you say,” Esmerelda said, “although I don’t see why you can’t leave them in the tavern. They always tramp mud into the house, and argue with Agatha.”

“They only argue with her because the old witch robs them so skilfully at stones,” the baron said, grinning.

Esmerelda grinned back.

“Yes, she’s a clever old thing. So, pigs’ trotters for my barbarian,” she said, turning back to kiss him.

“Your bastard,” the baron reminded her, as she slipped on a shawl and went to find her servant.

He stretched out on the bed and yawned happily. It was a good life, although it did have its troubles. Thinking of bastards, there was that idiot Martmann, for instance. How anybody could have suspected that he could have been even an illegitimate relation had always struck the baron as quite insulting, but he had had to go along with his father’s will and give the fool the stewardship of an outpost.

Not anymore, though. Martmann had taken the quietest of all the barony’s outposts and managed to get both him and his whole garrison slaughtered by some strange sort of orc.

The baron had seen one of the thing’s corpses, and it hadn’t looked much, all skin and bone. Still, tomorrow he’d lead his men up into the hills to see if he could find any more of them. No doubt he’d find some heads for the gibbet while the outpost was rebuilt. Maybe he should have battlements instead of a sloping roof? Mind you, that would be expensive, and Sigmar alone knew how much diamond

necklaces cost.

It was thus trying to decide between fortifications and jewellery that he started to drift off to sleep, a happy man without a care in the world.

The next thing he knew, Esmeralda was shaking his arm and hissing something into his ear.

"Not now," the baron grumbled as he stretched and opened his eyes. "At least give me a minute to get my strength back first."

"Get up," she hissed, and the baron realised that she was genuinely frightened. "There's somebody downstairs."

"Of course there's somebody downstairs," he said, frowning. "Look, if you don't want my men in your house—"

"Idiot!" she said. "Not your men. Your men are dead, murdered."

"Impossible," the baron said. Even so, he rolled out of bed, and drew the sword from the scabbard that lay on top of his pile of clothes. The sheen of the blade was a comforting antidote to the anxiety in Esmeralda's eyes.

"Not impossible at all," Esmeralda said, and, for the first time, he noticed the stiletto that she held in one white-knuckled fist. She held it underhanded like a real warrior, and despite the adrenaline that had started to pulse through the baron, he felt a moment of pride at his choice of mistress. Tilean women, he thought with a smile, were magnificent.

She scowled at his expression.

"Don't you believe me?" she asked, and the baron thought better about trying to tease her. There were, it seemed, more important matters at hand.

"Yes, I believe you. What did the assassin look like? And what in Sigmar's name is that smell?"

"The assassin?" Esmeralda said, shrugging, and looked nervously at the door. "He was robbing the bodies or something. I didn't wait to see more. Are you going to kill him?"

The baron, who had been contemplating leaving through the window, saw the vengeful gleam in her eyes and changed his mind.

"Of course," he said.

He took a step towards the door when, with a sudden violence that smashed the heavy wooden rectangle off its hinges, and sent it spinning into the far wall, the assassin burst into the room.

It was not quite the same monstrosity that the baron's doomed garrison had seen. Its spine was straighter, and the bulging power of its musculature was more evenly proportioned. Its skin had lost much of its translucent quality too, although, beneath the filth that begrimed it, that was hardly any improvement. Its claws remained as sharp as ever, and so did the sharpness of its needle teeth, and the

even sharper stink of it.

As the baron looked at the thing, he had the sudden, absolute conviction that this was a dream. Things like this didn't exist. He stood, mouth open in shock, and would have stood there until his death had Esmerelda's piercing scream not roused him, like a slap across the face.

He looked at her, and realised that, dream or reality, he would die to protect her.

So he did.

It was a brutal, one-sided fight. The baron used one of the silk sheets as if he were an Estalian in a bull ring, snatching it off the bed, and whipping the material towards the monstrosity's face. Takoned claws snatched the thing away, the razor-sharp tips shredding the fabric with ease, but already the baron had lunged forward, the tip of his blade finding the soft spot just beneath the bony plates of the thing's ribcage.

It was a blow skilful enough to have gutted a deer. Against this monstrous assassin, it was less effective. The baron felt a shock run through his arm, as though he had tried to punch his sword through the trunk of a tree. As he staggered back, he saw the small, black-blooded wound that was the only damage his blow had done. The edges of the wound rippled and closed.

"Esmerelda!" the baron cried, waving towards the shuttered window. "Get out. Run!"

However, Esmerelda Dolacita Fangollini, born Gudrun Schweinfurt and raised in the Sigmarite nunnery in Altdorf, had no intention of running. Everything she had, she had earned, and neither man, woman nor the daemon which stood before her was going to take it from her.

She moved with a viper's speed, the blade in her hand blurring, as she leapt onto the bed, and slashed her stiletto towards the intruder's throat.

The blow never landed. With a flicker of effort, the foul-smelling beast clipped her with the back of its hand, and she was sent spinning back onto the bed.

The sight of her sprawled form was too much for the baron. Forgetting every lesson of swordsmanship he had ever been taught, he reversed his grip on his sword and raised it two-handed to stab down towards his target. Before he could strike, the creature grabbed the blade, its taloned fingers closing around the razor-sharp steel tightly.

The baron was being lifted off the floor, but, before he could react, his world exploded into pain: pure, unadulterated pain.

He had never known that pain like this could exist. The perfection of agony was so great that, after the air hissed from his lungs, he

couldn't even draw another breath to scream with.

The hilt of his sword slipped through his nerveless fingers and he staggered backwards. He looked down, still unable to comprehend how such agony could exist, and saw that his entrails had been spilled. They hung from his unzipped belly, pink and glistening, and fresh coils of them squirmed from his abdomen as he stepped back. He wheezed, trying to breathe, but he couldn't draw breath. The pain was so bright that he wasn't even sure he wanted to.

He looked back up into the glowing eyes of the thing that had undone him. He wanted to beg it for Esmerelda's life, but, when he tried, his mouth opened and closed as silently as a landed fish.

I will consider sparing her, a voice answered inside the baron's head. It was as smooth as silk, although, the fact that it was inside his head made it even more horrible than the pain. I will consider, if you can explain why you gave the order to slay my people.

For a moment, the baron, the last of his life evaporating in a furnace of agony and blood loss, had no idea what the creature meant. Then, pushed into his thoughts as easily as a branding iron into butter, there came the image of a Strigany caravan.

It was Averland, the baron tried to say, the elector count. I was only obeying my liege's orders.

He was interrupted, not by that silent, insistent voice, but by the sudden flash of teeth. The monster buried them in the baron's jugular, and, as the beast satiated its thirst, the baron turned to snatch one, final glance at Esmerelda.

Desheritato, he thought, and then died. Ushoran, that had been his name.

Ushoran: a good name, a noble name, a name as powerful as the northern winds, and as searing as the desert sun. How many monuments had been carved with that name, the very bones of the earth chiselled into an homage to his beauty? How many men had whispered the name, making a tribute of their living breath?

Yes, Ushoran he had been, and Ushoran he was again. As he stared down at the drained husk of his victim, the name beat within his consciousness like a beacon, beckoning through a fog-cloaked sea, and he rejoiced in it.

The blood that he had taken from the baron had been a rich, heady mixture, sparkling with will and pride and energy. After an eternity skulking amongst carrion, the borrowed life filled Ushoran with such a terrible brightness that he wondered why he had forgone the joy of it for so long.

Of course, he had been forced to forgo it. After the green tide that had obliterated his land, there had come the betrayal by his own cousins. That betrayal had been the ultimate catastrophe. He and his

kind had been scattered to the four winds, and hunted like lions by the wolf packs of lesser bloodlines.

It was only by feeding, unseen and unheard, in graveyards and plague pits that he had been able to remain hidden from his cousins. Those of his kind who had been unable to forgo the more succulent juiciness of living prey had long since gone, betrayed by rumours carried by their prey, and killed by their cousins for sport or for spite.

His cousins, Ushoran thought, and the black fire of hatred flared in his unbeating chest: those who followed the serpent and the dragon and the wolf. It had been so long since he had allowed himself to think of the disgrace that they had inflicted upon him that he had almost forgotten it, almost, but not quite. Even in the darkest centuries, the memory of their betrayal had always pulsed in the depths of his soul, as insistent as a rotten tooth or a broken bone.

Well, curse them.

He was Ushoran.

He would skulk no longer.

Eyes glittering with savage pride, he held his hand up and studied it. The animal claws had grown straighter, sharper, more refined. Then he touched his face, carefully. Had the twisted knots of gristle and scar tissue that had so mocked his former beauty begun to fade?

Perhaps, he thought, as he turned to the woman who lay on the bed.

She was a fine animal, glowing with health. Her robe had slipped from her when she had been thrown across the room, and Ushoran studied her body. It was perfectly formed. Her features were even. Her hair was glossy, and she was neither too fat nor too skinny.

As his eyes studied her animal warmth, Ushoran slipped back into the memories of the past. He had kept women like this in his court, once. Pretty little animals that he had kept as pets, and occasionally as playthings, for his most loyal vassals.

It suddenly occurred to him that maybe it was time to start rebuilding his court. He knew that it would be a pale imitation of what it had once been, but it would be better than the carrion things that had gathered around him during the blighted ages of his exile.

He grimaced, and slid an ice-cold tongue down the slivers of his teeth. It had been a long time since he had bound anybody to him with their blood. To scavenge or to kill was one thing, but to bind with blood was quite another.

Still, he decided as she began to stir from her unconsciousness, she is deserving.

Needle teeth slaverling, and eyes pulsing with the warm glow of her lover's blood, Ushoran bent over the unconscious girl, and prepared to give her a gift that would make diamond necklaces seem

as worthless to her as a string of clay beads. Ushoran didn't know how much time had passed since he had feasted upon the baron. The freshness of the world could make a moment last an age, just as, in the darkness of his exile, an age had lasted a moment. He wasn't sure where he was, either. After so long spent as a pariah, slinking along the hidden byways of the fugitive and the damned, he was unfamiliar with the surface realms he travelled through. He still moved at night, the shadow of his presence coming and going, unseen and unguessed at, apart from the terrible remains that his feasting left in his wake.

Once his feasting had been confined to carrion, and the remains had been terrible enough, but now, his palate, as well as the rest of him, was growing increasingly refined, and the consequences of his appetites grew ever more horrific.

The exquisite misery he left behind him was a detail he revelled in. The horror of the mortals was, after all, the highest expression of their respect, and, after so many years spent rotting, he craved respect almost as much as he craved the deliciousness of snuffed life.

It was a diet that agreed with him. Every night, he grew a little stronger. Every night, his hideous deformities unknotted a little further. It was the fresh blood that did it, the warm, vibrant pulsing blood of healthy humans. Somehow, the more he drank, the thirstier he became, and he wondered at the self-control he must have possessed in order to wean himself off of it for so long.

No matter. Those days of sneaking and hiding were gone. It wasn't just the stolen life that sang through his ancient veins that told him so. There was something else, too, something in the invisible winds that blew through the destiny of this world.

It was time to make good on his promise to his people.

It was time to return to Mourkain.

As he stood on the top of this granite crag, he could feel the approach of those he had summoned. Even a week before, he wouldn't have had the power. Not only would he have lacked the art of calling to these creatures, but he wouldn't have had the strength to bear the grey light of the overcast afternoon either. Every second he stood in it was pure agony, every time the cloud parted a little, he felt that he was being licked by fire.

Still, what was pain compared to the destiny that lay ahead of him?

He was Ushoran, and he had awakened.

The sound of beating wings roused him from his reverie. He gazed upwards, red eyes a muddy brown in the grey light, and saw the first dark shapes of the messengers that approached. They were clothed in darkness, their feathers as black as night, and their eyes twinkling like onyx beads.

Ushoran smiled at their approach, the expression sending twinges through the dead flesh of his unused muscles. The ravens had always been friends to his kind, and, when he had called, they had willingly returned to his service.

The ravens were upon him, and he stood, arms outstretched like some nightmare scarecrow that had been built by the birds to terrify the farmer. The ravens circled, and, if he could sense their hesitation, he could soothe it, too. Eventually, the first of them, a silver-feathered old thing that looked at least a century out of the egg, landed on his outstretched talon.

Ushoran turned to it, whispered his message, and then watched, as the old thing flapped its way into the sky once more.

Soon, others braved the terrible, irresistible presence of their master, and the sky was swarming with crows, as thickly as if they had been flies around a corpse.

When they went, they went quickly winging their way to his kind, or to the ragged remnants of his mortal priesthood, and to the scattered flocks of their people. The message he sent them was the same, simple command: the time is upon us.

It is the time of return.

The last of the ravens departed as night fell. Ushoran took a moment to revel in the release from the agony of daylight, before slipping silently into the darkness as he began to hunt.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“A true Kazarkhan must be an alchemist. He must know how to combine fire and water, summer and winter. He must know how to show mercy to those he has vanquished while showing justice to those who have vanquished them.”

– From the Catechism of the Kazarkhan On the day after the battle, the morning sun rose to reveal a day as fine as any the Strigany had seen since arriving at Flintmar. Autumn still lay heavy in the air, but the sky was the deep, endless blue of a perfect summer’s day, and the southern breeze was as warm as any embrace.

Some of those who had survived took the fine weather as a good omen, a celebration of their victory.

Others took it as the god’s mockery of their loss. In one day, they had almost been annihilated, almost. Only the will of Ushoran had saved them, but, lost in the misery of their ruined lives, not many found it in their hearts to thank him.

Bodies lay everywhere, tangled together in the cold intimacy of death. Young and old, Strigany and mercenary, man and woman; in the heat of battle none had been spared.

Then there were the wounded, the constant, wailing, weeping wounded. They called out for aid that only a few of their fellows could give. The petrus stalked amongst them, tending to their wounds as tirelessly as the crows tended to the bodies of the dead. There was an abundance of carrion birds, but there were too few healers. Always too few.

There were even prisoners to be dealt with. Most of the mercenaries had managed to flee, disappearing off into the endless wastes of the moor to find whatever fate awaited them. Others, too badly wounded or too shocked to run, had fallen into the Striganyes’ hands.

It was their screams that finally woke Brock on that terrible, beautiful morning.

He emerged from the black depths of a sleep that had been more like a coma. After he had set his men to rebuilding the barricades the evening before, he had returned to his wagon to make tea from some of the painkilling herbs that Petru Engel had provided him with.

That was the last thing he remembered. He sat up, blinking in the gloom of his wagon, trying to remember where he was. His back ached, and he realised that he must have collapsed before making it to his hammock.

He enjoyed a moment of perfect, carefree peace. Then, the memories of the day before, and the responsibilities ahead, rushed

over him, and he lurched to his feet.

Every muscle ached. Every joint was stiff.

“By Ushoran, I’m too old for this,” he muttered.

As he pulled on his boots, he heard another chorus of screams, animalistic in the abandon of their misery, and realised that they must have woken him up. He stretched, ignoring the pain, and then stepped outside his wagon.

The sunlight was bright enough to make him squint, and he had to blink a couple of times, before seeing the extent of the ruin that surrounded him. Hardly a wagon remained unturned. Hardly a yard of mud was visible beneath the tangled corpses and strewn belongings. Where once the muddy streets had been alive with his people, now, they were alive with little more than crows and swarming flies.

He staggered back against the door of his wagon. Had this been victory?

“Good morning, Kazarkhan.”

Brock blinked again, and turned to see who had addressed him. It was Mihai. His red hair was clotted with dried blood, and he was pale with exhaustion. The twins stood behind him. One had his arm in a sling. The other was staring through the walls of a wagon and into the distance.

Brock looked at them, and realised that yes, this had been a victory. After all, they were alive.

He gripped Mihai by the shoulder, and shook him, wanting to make sure that he was real. Then he smiled.

“You made it,” he said, breathing the words.

Thank you, Ushoran, Brock thought. Thank you for saving my son.

“Yes,” Mihai shrugged. “I’m alive.”

The two stood awkwardly for a moment. Another chorus of screams floated through the air, and both men turned, glad of the distraction.

“What the hell is that?” Brock asked. “Are the petrus up to their old tricks?”

Mihai shook his head.

“I don’t think so. At least, not from where those screams are coming from.”

“Where’s that?”

“The amphitheatre, where the prisoners were. That’s why I came to wake you.”

Brock looked at his son, and scratched his chin.

“Oh? We’d better go and have a look, then.” He paused, turning back. “By the way, how did you do it? To turn those giants against their masters must have taken some persuasion.”

“Oh, we just grabbed their handler. When you have the bull by the balls, he will follow.”

Brock laughed.

“You’re a real Strigany, all right,” he said. “I’m proud of you, do you know that? Not just because of yesterday, either. I mean...”

Brock trailed off, lost for words. Another peal of screams cut through the air, and he shook his head.

“Ah hell. Let’s go and sort this out.”

The four men set off through the bright sunlight and dark shadows that lay among the ruins of the camp. At first, their going was slow. The way was choked with debris and bodies, and none of them wanted to step over the dead. They soon became less squeamish, however, and found themselves climbing over the drifts of bodies as easily as they scrambled over the ruined wagons that lay shattered or burned all around.

As they drew nearer to the amphitheatre, Brock remembered it as the bloody testing ground where he had fought barely two days ago. Had it been only two days, he wondered, as he nodded to the Strigany he passed? It seemed more like two years, two lifetimes. He brooded on the thought, as he marched to the middle of the amphitheatre. Then he stopped, and a look of puzzlement creased his brow, as he tried to understand what he was seeing.

There were perhaps a hundred captives, perhaps more. Where once the mercenaries had strutted, now they cowered. Their uniforms, which had been confections of male vanity and martial style, were torn and ragged, and the men within them looked as bedraggled as peasants.

Flies swarmed around some of them, worrying at the dried crusts of their injuries. Others, although apparently unharmed, sat lost in the depths of their shock, as pale and unmoving as the dead.

In the centre of this miserable collection of broken humanity a mob of self-appointed executioners was busy.

Brock didn’t recognise any of them, although they were Strigany, right enough. He could tell by their loose-fitting clothes and their sharp features. He could also tell by the traditional slaughter frame they had erected among their captives. It was a simple enough thing to use and to transport in a wagon, just three poles with a winch at the apex, and the carcass of the animal hanging down from it.

Brock watched the butchers going about their bloody work, and for a moment he forgot about everything but the rumbling in his stomach. He should give the order to start preparing food for the survivors. Stew would be best, hot and easy, and nourishing. The gods knew they would need their strength in the hours ahead.

Then the scream came again, shrill enough to cut through his

confusion. One of the Strigany butchers stepped away from his work, and Brock recognised the neatly dissected carcass for the animal it was.

“Stop!” he bellowed. The butchers turned to look at their Kazarkhan, knives and cleavers in their hands. When they recognised Brock, they lowered their tools, although with a reluctance that Brock was keen enough to note.

He marched through the captives, Mihai and the twins at his back, until he stood before the slaughter frame. Incredibly, the mercenary that hung from it was still alive. He glistened pinkly in the brightness of the morning sun, his body covered in blood.

Brock saw the bundles of muscles that twitched, as the man writhed in blind agony from side to side, and, with a rush of nausea, he realised that he was not looking at bloodied skin. He was not looking at any skin at all. The man before him had been flayed alive.

The Kazarkhan’s face hardened, and he looked again at the people who had done this. They returned his appraisal, and, although some of them looked uneasy, none seemed ashamed.

“Who,” Brock asked. “Who told you to do this?”

“I did, Kazarkhan.”

The voice seemed genuinely cheerful, and so did the old woman who had spoken. She stepped forward from behind one of her helpers, a stooped and wiry figure whose tiny body was lost within the black sack cloth of her robes. Her face was liver-spotted and sharp, and the weathered lines of it were creased.

She was perhaps eighty, Brock estimated, and, from the innocent joy that glittered in her eyes, she might have been interrupted while playing with her grandchildren, or gossiping and sewing with her friends.

The flensing knives in her hands, though, showed that she had been practising another craft altogether. Brock stared at the blades. The bony claws of her fingers were splattered with droplets of blood from her handiwork, and, despite her age, her grip on her weapons seemed sure.

“What do you think you are doing, grandmother?” Brock asked, forcing himself to use the honorific. If, as he suspected, this woman had been driven mad, it wouldn’t do to provoke her.

“Oh, I’m no grandmother,” she sighed, and, for a moment, the warm good humour that twinkled within the wrinkled pouches of her eyes dimmed. “I am a crone. Crone Maria, from the caravan of Domnu Malfi. As for what am I doing, well Kazarkhan, that’s obvious. I am extracting retribution, just as our Lord Ushoran would have us all do.”

There was a murmur of agreement from the mob that had gathered around her, and Brock fought back the urge to tell them

what he thought of their retribution. They were armed. Their blood was up, and, now that he thought about it, there was a hint of madness about more than one of them. It was in the fever that burned in their eyes, and in their deafness to the screams of the man they had been torturing. Most of all, it was in the way they held themselves.

"We have all suffered, crone," he said, at length, "but there will be no execution of prisoners while I am Kazarkhan. Is that clear?"

He locked eyes with the old woman. She didn't seem particularly perturbed, just carried on smiling and nodding, and, suddenly Brock found himself wondering why he had been so upset. He had been overreacting. He must be overwrought, overtired.

A gust of wind set the hanging man spinning again, and he recovered consciousness for long enough to call out for his mother. His voice sounded too high-pitched for a man, and, Brock noticed that Maria, not content with skinning him, had removed other parts of his body too.

With a lurch of understanding, he blinked, and, feeling like a sleep walker who awakes to find himself standing on the edge of a precipice, he looked back at the crone.

"It is bad that you have done this thing," he said levelly, "worse that you think that I, Kazarkhan, chosen of Ushoran and our people, could be persuaded with some witch's charm. I have told you," he said pausing, and turning to face the gathered mob. "I have told you that there will be no execution of prisoners. I am Kazarkhan. You will obey."

They looked at him sullenly, and Brock was suddenly glad to have Mihai and the twins at his back. These people were like dogs whose bones had been taken away.

No. No, that wasn't exactly it, Brock thought. What they look like are the mobs we had to fight through to get here: sullen, vicious and cowardly.

His disgust for them flared. They were Strigany. They should know better. They should be better.

"But Kazarkhan," the crone said, her voice soothing with all the tones of sweet reason, "we aren't executing them. I have learned some small skill as a midwife. I know of the humours and their rhythms, and of what will kill and what will not. I am merely exacting retribution. Whether they live or die is in the hands of their gods, weak and pitiful things that they obviously are."

Again, Brock felt himself wanting to agree. Again, he resisted the temptation. It was Mihai who spoke.

"Excuse me for asking, most honoured crone," he said with a polite bow, "but do you have any news of Chera, from your caravan? Did she survive the battle?"

Maria turned to him, and her eyes blinked in recognition.

“Yes, she is well, well and happy. I am sure that she will have some happy news for all of us soon.”

“Happy news?”

Maria nodded.

“It was about time she was married.”

“Married?”

Maria winked at him.

“Don’t look so shocked,” she said, “and don’t look so upset. There will be plenty of girls for you. After all, you are the hero of this battle.” Mihai felt his chest swell. “You are the tamer of the giants, the lightning from the clear blue sky.” His back straightened. “You are the saviour of our people, chosen by Ushoran to be the vessel of his divine will. Make no mistake, it is through you that Ushoran saved us.”

In that moment, Mihai knew it to be the truth. Kazarkhan was one thing, but what was a title compared to the reality of their god’s will?

“You who are the saviour of our people,” Maria continued. “You know it. You can feel it. You can feel it in the beating in your chest,” she whispered, “in the air in your lungs, in the ground beneath your feet. It is the will of Ushoran. It is the force of destiny.”

As the crone spoke, Mihai listened to his heart, listened to his breath, and felt the world that spun beneath him. He believed.

“In fact, take this,” Maria said, continuing with the smooth confidence of a cobra who has hypnotised its prey. “I will give you the honour of taking retribution from those who would destroy us all.”

The mob cheered Mihai as he reached out to take the knife, and, although it was shrill, the sound of their acclaim was sweet, so very sweet.

The hilt of the flensing blade was warm in his hand, the weight comforting.

“Mihai,” Brock said, “there will be no execution of prisoners here.”

Mihai turned to regard his father, and his eyes hardened with resentment. The contempt he has for me, Mihai thought, for me! A man, and not just any man, but the hero of the battle, the chosen of Ushoran. He is jealous. That is why he hates me, why he has always hated me.

“Are you sure there’ll be no execution of prisoners, Kazarkhan?” Boris piped up, his tone light, but his eyes wary, “not even for the hero of the bottle?”

“She said the battle,” Bran corrected him.

“Then she got that one wrong,” Boris said, “or, maybe she hasn’t heard about what happened in that tavern by Altdorf.”

"The bottle was the hero of that one," Bran said. "He may be the vessel of Ushoran, but he still puked like a sewer."

Mihai turned on them, annoyed by their prattle. Perhaps he should stop hanging around with them. They talked like fools.

"Mihai," Brock said softly, "listen to your friends."

"They are nice boys," the crone added, her tone layering the words with a dozen different meanings, none of them good, "entertaining, but, there will be time for them later."

Suddenly, from nowhere, the urge to use the crone's weapon on his father burned through the confusion of Mihai's thoughts. He had no idea where the impulse came from, but it was as bright as a wrecker's lantern on a dark night.

After all, he was the chosen of Ushoran, so, why not?

The answer came to him in a sudden, terrifying memory of the things he had seen with Dannie in the lair of the Old Father. The pallid, broken things that had once been human, they had been the chosen of Ushoran too.

Mihai shook his head, suddenly appalled at the murderous impulse that had almost seized him. The crone's expression hardened as she felt her grip slipping, and she took a step back as Mihai advanced, blade outstretched. It wasn't the crone he was aiming for, though, it was the hanging man. As the mob looked on, Mihai lunged forward, putting the man out of his misery with a killing stroke.

He shuddered as the mercenary's life flowed out of him. Then he turned to face the mob.

"He was dead already," he told them, "but you heard the Kazarkhan. No more killing of prisoners."

Then he turned back to face his father. Suddenly, he was exhausted and his hands were trembling.

"Well done," Brock said, and Mihai heard the pride in his voice. "As for you, crone," he said, "many of our people have need of your healing skills. Go and tend to them."

For the first time, the woman's good humour vanished, and her tones curdled with the darkness that had lain beneath.

"You are lucky, Kazarkhan. Not many are as lucky as you. These people are not. After all, you still have your son."

She looked at Mihai with the look of a butcher appraising a lamb, and then bundled up her blades and slipped away.

Brock watched her go. Then he turned on the others she had assembled.

"Go," he told them, "and make yourselves useful."

They turned, and, with barely a mutter, sidled out of the amphitheatre. Brock watched them go. Then he saw the faces of the mercenaries, who had been watching him, watching their fate be

decided.

“Sorry about that,” he said with a wicked grin, “but you know how women are when they get in a mood.”

Nobody laughed. Nobody smiled. He didn’t blame them.

“Stay here,” he told them. “Stay quiet. There will be work for you. In time you’ll be set free.”

They looked at him as dumb as a herd of sheep. Brock shrugged. He had more important things to think about now.

“As to you three,” he continued, turning to his son and the twins, “maybe you should stay here. Make sure nobody else gets any ideas.”

“Even though I’m the chosen of Kazarkhan?”

Brock’s mouth opened as he turned to his son.

Then he saw the grin on his face, and the two of them started laughing. It was the last time Brock was to laugh in a long time. In the aftermath of their victory, his first priority was to deal with the dead, and dead there were aplenty.

Almost a quarter of their number had been killed, or wounded so badly that they were to die over the next few days. The Strigany custom was to bury their dead, to bury them deep, but the marshy ground, and the numbers involved, made that all but impossible.

Then there were the flies, and the rats. Nobody knew how so many had gathered so quickly, but, on the day after the battle, the ruins of the Striganies’ encampment was swarming with vermin, eager to feast on the bodies of the dead.

It was Domnu Malfi’s caravan that provided the solution, in the form of the corpse powder they had used to burn the plague victims of the Empire. The bodies were stacked outside the camp, like so much soggy cordwood. Some of them were already beginning to stink, the gas of their decomposition enough to turn even the strongest of stomachs.

They stank even worse when they were burned. By that afternoon, the greasy smoke of their burning flesh hung in the air, soaking into hair and clothes as deeply as any liquid. The worst thing about it was not that it smelled bad, but that it didn’t. Far from it. As the bodies of their kin crisped and carbonised, the Striganies’ camp was filled with the mouth-watering smell of roasting pork.

Few of those who engaged in the gruesome task escaped without nightmares. None of them ever touched pork again, an aversion that they passed on to their children.

The toll on the wagons had been even higher, although most of them, could be repaired. As the bodies burned, so the Striganies’ carpenters worked on the wagons, with an urgency that reflected the new idea that had taken them after the horrors of their victory in battle.

It was an old idea, an idea carved into the beam of every wagon, but, suddenly, everybody was talking about it as though it was an idea that they had just discovered. It raced through the conversations of the traumatised survivors of the slaughter, like the seasonal fires that race through the Reikwald in summer.

It was a clear idea, and it was as simple as it was impossible.

It worried Brock no end.

They had to flee, of course. There could be no doubt that, although they had driven off the mercenaries, they hadn't broken them. Brock knew full well, from his younger days, how things would work. The mercenaries who had fled in such terror the day before would by now be back in their camp, like dogs who had retreated to lick their wounds. However, as the ale flowed and the coin jingled, they would regain their courage, even as their leaders recalculated and planned for their next attack. Brock knew that the next attack would be the end of them.

So they had to flee, of course they did, but to flee to Mourkain?

He had called on Petru Engel, in the dark, silent hours of that night, to talk his people out of this madness. Apart from the sentries, who were stationed on the rebuilt barricades, the camp was slumbering, everybody exhausted by the weight of the day's harrowing work.

Brock knocked on the petru's door, and wasn't surprised to find the old man waiting for him, bright eyed within the confines of his wagon.

"Good evening, Kazarkhan," he said, nodding to Brock, who nodded back as he sat cross legged on the floor.

"Good evening yourself, petru," he replied, and took out his pipe and tobacco pouch. "Where's Dannie?"

"He's out visiting," the petru said, looking strangely nostalgic as he accepted the tobacco pouch from Brock, and started to fill his own pipe. "He's found himself a woman. I've had to stop training him, it's got that bad. His head seems full of wool."

Brock lit a match, and leered into the sulphur flare.

"If I remember rightly, it isn't a surplus of cotton wool he's suffering from," he said. He drew on his pipe and blew a smoke ring up into the wooden beams of the wagon. "Still, I'm sure she'll take care of it soon enough. He's a good lad. Good prospects of becoming a petru. Did well in the battle."

"He's not the only one," Engel said, returning Brock's tobacco, and drawing on his own pipe. "Mihai is quite the hero. The giants' handler is still around, by the way, wanting to be paid."

"We'll pay him, I suppose," Brock decided. "It's just a shame he lost both of his beasts. They might have come in useful."

"They did come in useful."

"Ah yes, the stew, are you sure that was all right?"

The petru shrugged.

"Meat is meat. After all, they were no more human than a monkey, and that's no more human than a cow."

"It was a fine meal, anyway," Brock said, although the smell of burning bodies had made more than one of his people vomit up the stew, almost as soon as they had swallowed it. Thank Ushoran that task was ended.

The two men smoked in companionable silence for a little while longer.

"Yes, Mihai did well," the petru mused. "You must be very proud of him."

"I've always been proud of him," Brock said, his beard bristled defiantly, even though he couldn't quite meet his old friend's gaze.

"Yes, well," the petru said, studying the glowing bowl of his pipe. "The past is what we want it to be. The future is what we make of it."

Brock grunted.

"One day, I'll find you short of a saying. Then I'll worry."

The petru blew a perfect smoke ring, watching it as it floated up, and then dissolved.

"You would have good reason to. Our customs, our tales, our words, they're our strength. They're what makes us better than the peasants, stronger, but everything has a price."

"Prices are for those who are willing to pay them," Brock said, pleased to have remembered the saying in time. Lacking Engel's skill, he usually couldn't come up with them until it was too late.

"Oh, we've been paying all right," the petru told him.

Brock looked at the old man, but his face was veiled beneath smoke and shadow.

"Have you heard the nonsense people have been talking?" Brock asked at length. "About returning to Mourkain?"

"Since I was born," Engel replied.

"You know what I mean," Brock said, fidgeting on the hard wood of the wagon floor. He felt a bite of cramp in one of his thighs. By the gods, he was getting soft in his old age.

"Ah yes," Engel said, nodding. "Before, returning to Mourkain was a dream, not a plan."

"Mourkain, of all places," Brock scoffed, "a name from stories and nursery rhymes."

Engel shrugged.

"And why do you think that it's in those stories and nursery rhymes, Kazarkhan?"

Brock looked at him suspiciously.

“Don’t tell me you believe in all this nonsense. Leaving the Empire, leaving civilisation, and for what? So that we can go and live in a place from a story.”

The petru studied his pipe before replying.

“And yet,” he said, “and yet Mourkain is real. As real as you, and you are in a dozen stories already, oh mighty Kazarkhan.”

Brock snorted.

“In fifty years, when the stories have made me into one of the gods, what will I be but dust and bones? No, when you petrus say that Mourkain existed, I believe you well enough. It is where our people were born, where our great lords taught us the arts, but, in the same stories, it also says that Mourkain was smashed by the orcs, and that we were scattered across the world like chaff on the four winds.”

“You remember well,” the petru told him mildly, “apart from the part that says that, one day, we will return.”

“One day,” Brock scoffed. “One of the things I’ve learned is that, what orcs smash stays smashed. Mourkain stood thousands of years ago. What will there be now but fallen stones? Everything else will have been plundered, even the bones.”

“What else will there be?” Engel replied. “Oh, nothing, nothing much, just dirt.” His eyes glittered as he spoke. “Just soil and land. The stories also tell us that the land there was as rich and as black as treacle cake, so fertile that you can grow three crops a year.”

“I don’t remember that,” Brock said, frowning.

“Us petrus tend to stick to the livelier tales around the campfires,” Engel said. “It keeps the ale flowing more freely, and the tobacco, of course.”

Brock handed him the pouch and watched him refill the pipe.

“So, maybe the land was rich,” he allowed. “Our ancestors had arts of which ours are a pale reflection.”

“You did learn the tales well,” Engel said complimenting him on his word perfect recitation.

“But that was thousands of years ago. What will be left of those farms but fallow ground and silt from the river?”

Engel looked at him, his face carefully blank.

“Sometimes,” he said at length, “I wonder if we are quite as superior in intellect to the peasants as we think we are. Nothing but fallow ground and silt from the river indeed. Why do you think the place is so fertile in the first place?”

Brock opened his mouth to speak, and then closed it again. A sudden suspicion had dawned on him.

“Tell me,” he asked, “what do you and the other petrus think of this madness? Surely you can’t think that leaving the Empire and hurling ourselves into the wilderness is anything more than collective

suicide?"

"I wouldn't presume to speak for the other petrus," Engel said smoothly, "although I don't suppose many would think that staying here would be anything other than death."

"Yes, of course," Brock said, exasperated, "but there are other places to go. The Empire is surrounded by wildernesses. We could even disappear into the Reikwald for a while."

"We could," Engel said, "but what story do you think the survivors will tell, back in the Empire? Of how they were out manoeuvred and outfought by a bunch of Strigany? Or that we had the Dark Gods on our side?"

Brock shrugged.

"The latter," he said, "which is all to the good. Let them fear us."

Again, Engel paused and looked at his Kazarkhan.

"Maybe we should have this conversation when you aren't so tired," he decided at length. "It may have escaped your attention, but there are three emperors at the moment, all of them vying to be the only one. How long do you think it would be before they realise what an easy victory against the 'Dark God' wiping us out would be?"

Brock shifted uncomfortably.

"You might be right. If they disbelieve the stories."

"If" doesn't come into it," Engel told him, relieved that the Kazarkhan was finally seeing sense. Sometimes it was like getting blood out of a stone. "The Elector Count Averland might be a lunatic, but most of his fellows aren't. When they come, it will be cautiously, and it will be with state regiments, not a rag bag of misfits and cut throats. Not that Averland's rag bag of misfits and cutthroats won't finish us off, anyway, unless we start moving."

Brock sighed.

"You might be right," he allowed, "but, even so, Mourkain's at the bottom of the world, even below Araby. How will we find the ships to take us there without traipsing back up through the whole murderous length of the Empire to find a port? Marienburg's the nearest by my reckoning, and that's a thousand miles away if it's a yard."

"Might as well be a million as a thousand," Engel said, "but it makes no sense to take ships. We have our horses, our wagons, and our feet, if it comes to it, and we know the way. It's over there."

The old man pointed towards the south, one bony finger outstretched towards the door of his wagon.

Brock gaped at him.

"Across the Black Mountains?"

Engel just smiled, blew a smoke ring, and said, "A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step."

"Ye gods," Brock said and rolled his eyes.

“Of course,” Engel told him, “we are still at war, and you are still Kazarkhan. When all’s said and done, the decision is yours.”

“Well, that’s all right then,” Brock said sarcastically, “and, if I decide to stay here, you and the rest of the petrus will be happy to obey, I suppose.”

“Happy to? No, but obey we will. You are the chosen of Ushoran. We have no choice.”

Brock heard the truth of it in the old man’s voice. If anything, it made the inevitability of the decision even worse. At least half of his people were too old or too young, or too sick to travel at all, let alone to face the howling wilderness of the Black Mountains. They had no maps, no guides and no equipment with which to face the sheer cliffs and black voids of the chasms.

Then there were the things that lived within that terrible wilderness, things desperate enough to make the mountains their home, and vicious enough to survive in them.

Brock sighed, and tried to blow a smoke ring. A sudden gust rattled beneath the door of the wagon, blurring the smoke, and sending a shiver down his spine.

Of course it’s cold, he thought. Winter’s on the way. Perfect, damned perfect.

“I’m too old for this,” he muttered. Petru Engel barked with laughter.

“Isn’t everybody, Kazarkhan? Isn’t everybody?”

“We’ll see. I’ll call the council tomorrow night, and we’ll see.” As she stalked through the night, as fleeting as an owl’s shadow, Maria’s face was twisted with an embittered passion. Ever since the idiot Brock had kept her from her rightful victims, she had been in a foul temper, and the day’s work had done nothing to improve it.

It wasn’t only that she had enjoyed paying back a little, oh so very little, of what the peasants had made her people suffer. It was also that she’d been denied the use of their fresh, juicy entrails. Ripe and clean, and sliced from still living bodies, the organs would have been rich in the humours her potions required.

Of course, she thought as she shifted the soggy satchel she wore beneath her cloak, I can use scraps of the dead, but they’re never as good. The potions never lasted as long, and they were never as strong.

She paused at a crossroads, her nose twitching like a rat’s as she peered up and down the paths to make sure they were empty. Her hatred eased for a moment, soothed by thoughts of her darling Chera. Ever since she had found the girl as a babe, she had become the star around which the dark matter of her withered life revolved. The peasants had done things to Maria that meant that she would never have her own flesh and blood daughter, but, by Ushoran’s venom, she

thought, Chera was the only daughter a mother could need.

The crone smiled at the thought of her little one grown up enough to be finding a man. It would be a wrench to lose a part of the closeness between them, but Maria had made more terrible sacrifices in the past for a lot less.

The trouble was, she thought, her smile twisting once more into a smirk of contempt, men are all idiots, even Dannie, apprentice to Petru Engel, and the only one who was worthy of her precious.

The crone, thinking back to the methods she had used to restore Chera's beauty, spat with disgust. She couldn't help herself. It was only the stupidity of men that had necessitated her terrible mission on that night.

Tonight, as she had stalked amongst the bodies of those who had died of their injuries, after the conflagration of the mass burnings, she had helped herself to what she needed, safe in the knowledge that the rats would get the blame. The rats and the other, worse things that had emerged from the night to join her in her carrion work.

Some of the creatures had known her. They had slunk away at her approach. Many more had not, though, and, emboldened by the fresh meat on which they had been feasting, some of them had fallen upon her.

Even now, the creatures' erstwhile comrades were feasting upon the cooling entrails of those who had made the mistake of turning on Petru Maria. That was just as well, she thought. By the time morning revealed the feasting, which had taken place among the remains of the dead, there would be no sign of exactly what things had been sating their appetites.

Ghouls, Maria thought with a rare shudder. If ever there was a warning of what carelessness could create, it was the nasty chores she had to undertake among the revolting creatures.

Still, if her people needed medicine then medicine they would get. None would know by what grisly craft she manufactured her salves and medicines. They would assume that they were no more than the herbs, and the perfume the crone used to mask the smell of the other ingredients.

Maria shifted the weight of her satchel again, and slowed as she approached the circled wagons of her caravan. Malfi had taken to setting his own guard, as well as the ones he had to provide for the perimeter, and she didn't want to waste any time on him. Luckily, the man was huddled over his fire as closely as a hen sitting on an egg. His face was bent over the glow of burning peat and his arms were wrapped around it. Maria hardly even had to tiptoe to pass him unseen.

When she was back in her wagon, she dropped the satchel onto

the floor with a damp thud, lit a lantern, and lit a small stove to start boiling water. She had a long night ahead of her.

She was bent over the pot, muttering to herself within the sanctity of her wagon, when the hairs suddenly pricked up on the back of her scrawny old neck. She whipped around, a knife in her hand, and then hissed with relief when she saw that it was only Chera.

“Poppet,” she said, “what are you doing sneaking up like that?”

“I’m too nervous about tomorrow to sleep,” Chera told her, no apology in her voice. She was staring at the grisly mess of entrails that Maria had been mixing into her potion.

“What are you making, Maria?” she asked, the accusation in her voice all the more irritating because it had the right to be there.

“Oh, just some medicine.”

Chera’s face hardened, her eyes turning cold.

“Those are human organs, aren’t they?”

Maria grunted and turned away, but Chera was not to be so easily dismissed.

“They are, aren’t they?” she said. “I recognise them.”

Maria sighed and shrugged her bony shoulders. It was probably as well that the girl found out, anyway. She would have to make her own concoctions in the years ahead.

“Yes, my love. Yes, they are.”

Chera sat down uninvited on Maria’s bed, and gazed at the heap of revolting ingredients.

Maria considered lying to soften the blow, but the time for that was over. After all, Chera would be a married woman tomorrow. It was time for her to start facing the realities of the world.

So, instead of lying, Maria told her exactly which ingredients her art depended on.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“True love is as blind as a true musician is deaf.”

– Strigany saying Brock shifted and savoured the smells of cooking that were wafting from the cooking fires into the amphitheatre. Roasting meat and baking cakes and the smell of hot mead thickened the air, the food from this evening feast ready for when the council ended.

It was just the way that Brock and Petru Engel had planned it. The Kazarkhan’s best friends in a difficult council were the empty bellies of his opponents. After all, it was the Kazarkhan who decided how long the debate would continue. It was the Kazarkhan who decided when it would end, too, and as the last of the petrus filed into their seats he nodded to the elder who would call the meeting to order.

The most ancient of petrus raised his hands, his liver-spotted fingers as steady as eagle’s claws.

“My family,” he intoned, in a voice impossibly deep for such a frail chest, “soon we will feast, and give thanks to Ushoran for our victory, but first, it falls to us to discuss a matter of great urgency. Will you listen to your Kazarkhan as he explains it to us?”

There was a chorus of assent, more muted than the cheers that had accompanied Brock’s elevation to Kazarkhan, but still loud enough to make the hairs rise on the back of his neck. The elder stepped back, eyes unreadable beneath his thick brows, and Brock stepped forward into the torchlight that lit the dusk. He studied the crowd for a moment and thought of what he had to say.

Suddenly, he realised what was unusual about today’s gathering. The petrus, instead of jealously guarding the relatively uncrowded benches of their own stand, had spread out among the rest of the gathered people. Their black uniforms were scattered among the embroidered finery of the rest of the Strigany, like dark stars in a bright sky.

Brock cleared his throat, took a deep breath, and spoke.

“My brothers,” he began, “the last year has brought us many hardships, and many tragedies. We have been driven from our trade routes, hounded, murdered and pushed to the very brink of destruction. However, we are Strigany, and when we are pushed, we push back.”

The crowd growled with approval, and Brock could see the sharp flashes of their vulpine smiles in the shadows.

“Even though this year was hard, the next year will be worse. Every fool who wants to wear the Emperor’s crown will be upon us,

trying to make a name for himself.”

“Let them come!” a voice cried out, and there was a roar of approval. Brock waited, stony-faced, until it had quietened.

“You think we will beat them? Yes, so do I. We will beat the first army, probably the second and maybe the third. After that, who will be left to bury our bones and the bones of our children?”

There was silence, broken only by some muttering.

“So what will we do?” one of Brock’s friends called out, just as he had been supposed to.

“We can heed the words of our ancestors,” Brock said simply, “the words that are written on the axles of all of our wagons. We can return to our once and future land, to Mourkain.”

He didn’t know what reaction he had expected to this announcement—derision, perhaps, uproar, certainly. What he hadn’t expected was the stillness, and the nods of agreement. He paused, nonplussed by the lack of argument, and then carried on.

“It will be a hard path, but we are used to that,” Brock said. “There will be danger, too, but better danger than the certainty of destruction.”

Still, there was no reply, just a low murmur of agreement, as soft as wind through a field of corn.

“There are some who might say,” Brock continued, anticipating an argument that, it seemed, wouldn’t be made, “that Mourkain is no more than a ruin, and so it is. The land, however, is rich, and, although the walls of the city have fallen, the stone of which they were built will remain, cut and ready to be stacked again.”

He waited, and again there wasn’t a single voice raised in disagreement.

“Let us vote,” a voice barked out of the silence, and Brock realised that it was the voice of Petru Engel. He hesitated, and then, with a shrug, decided that the old man probably knew what he was talking about.

“Very well,” Brock said. “Let us vote.”

The elder, who had been waiting behind him as still as a shadow, stepped back to the front of the stage.

“The Kazarkhan will lead us to Mourkain,” he said, his voice as heavy as the body at the end of a hangman’s noose. “Will we follow him?”

As one voice, the Strigany spoke, their answer as spontaneous.

“Yes,” they cried, one voice, one people.

Where once that thought would have filled Brock with pride, now it sent some strange anxiety twisting through him. It was the same tingling sensation that he sometimes felt on the battlefield when an arrow was being aimed at him, or when an unseen blow sliced

towards him.

“Very well,” he said, ignoring the feeling, and trying to sound cheerful. “We are decided. Tomorrow we will make what plans need to be made for our new life. For now, for tonight, let us start the feasting, and think of nothing but the blessing that Ushoran has given us in the joy of our children.”

This time, when the crowd responded, they did so with a rowdy conviction that made their earlier acquiescence all the more unsettling.

Still, the decision was taken.

Mourkain awaited them.

Brock bowed to the elder, and then jumped down off the stage to greet the domnus who had gathered around to speak to him.

It wasn't until much, much later that he started to wonder who, exactly, had made the decision that he and his people would return to Mourkain.

By that time, of course, it was too late. “So you're not nervous then?” Mihai asked for the dozenth time that morning. Dannie didn't say anything. He merely ran his finger around the collar of his tunic. In the rush to leave, he hadn't had time to get a proper wedding tunic, so this was one of his old ones, quickly washed and freshly mended. Now, as Dannie sat around this fateful morning's breakfast fire with his friends, the garment felt too heavy, too restrictive.

“Why should he be nervous?” Boris added, enjoying the sight of Dannie's anxiety almost as much as Mihai was. “After all, he isn't the only one getting married today. It isn't as if all those thousands of people gathered in the amphitheatre are going to be staring at him alone.”

“Unless,” Bran mused, looking up from the pot of porridge he was stirring, “he does something stupid, like slips on the matting, for instance.”

“Or forgets his lines,” his brother said, nodding.

“Or,” said Mihai, not to be outdone, “finds that his bride has decided not to turn up after all.”

Dannie, who felt like throwing up, pinched the top of his nose between his forefinger and thumb, and decided to change the subject.

“It will all be over by midday anyway,” he said, “and we will be on our way to Mourkain.”

“Mourkain,” Mihai said. “I still can't quite believe it.”

“What else is there?” Dannie asked. “It isn't just that the time is right, but what else is left for us? This?”

He waved vaguely towards the mosquito-ridden bog that stretched away in all directions. His friends stared silently into the fire, lost in their thoughts as they waited for the porridge to boil.

Since the battle they had been on ever-shortening rations, and well-cooked porridge made the difference between a day spent hungry and a day spent downright starving, and the journey hadn't even begun.

"You're right," Boris said. "If we did go back to the Empire, it would be one, long battle. Things were bad enough then."

Dannie nodded, although he would happily have faced any battle rather than the terrifying ordeal that lay ahead of him today.

"Mourkain." Mihai repeated the name again, rolling it around his tongue as if to get the taste of it. "The petru showed me a map. It's at the very bottom of the world. Then there are the mountains and the deserts. There are also big white patches that could be anything."

"Sounds good," Boris said, smiling. "Think of all the opportunities there, all the loot!"

"All the monsters," Bran said.

"And the work," Dannie added.

"Hearken to you," Mihai said. "It's almost as though you aren't looking forward to it."

The twins shrugged in unison, and Dannie still looked thoughtful, even as he started to ladle the porridge into bowls.

"Things will be very different, certainly," he said, passing the bowls around.

"Ah yes," Mihai said, nodding sagely, "you'll be a married man."

"Unless he makes a mess of repeating his vows," Boris said.

"Why would he do that?" Bran asked his brother. "After all, if he has the nerve to get married in front of so many people, why would he go and forget his lines? That hardly ever happens. Although, there was that time in Kleiford. Remember that one? When the father-in-law thought that the groom was taking the rise out of his daughter."

"How they fought!" Boris said, nodding at the happy memory.

"What I meant," Dannie said, "is that we'll have to do things differently. The petru says we'll have to start working the land, and become farmers."

"To the hells with that," Mihai said. "You can paddle about in the mud if you want. I'm going to trade."

"With who?" Dannie asked him.

"Whoever. Anyway, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Just imagine, though, whoever we find, they won't have done business with Strigany before. They won't know what hit them."

"If there are people to trade with," Boris muttered, with all the rock-solid assurance of the true pessimist.

"Then, instead of trade there will be plunder," Mihai decided.

The four of them had gone on to debating the difference between growing corn and raising sheep, and they were still arguing, when, amidst the bustle of a thousand wagons being prepared for the

journey, the time came for the ceremony. Brock stood on the platform that had been built in the amphitheatre. He was wearing the same embroidered tunic that he had worn on the night when he had become Kazarkhan, and, as if he needed a further reminder of that brutal night, the elder who had officiated at the selection process was also officiating at today's marriage ceremony.

Many couples had chosen this festival day to take their vows, and they waited together in the afternoon sunshine. Brock had never seen so many couples married at once, but then, things had changed. The chaos of the flight to the south, and the carnage of the subsequent battle, had melted away much of the polite hesitation and endless calculation that usually preceded a Strigany marriage. It had obviously washed away a lot of the old taboos, too. More than one bride was already fat-bellied, and, although the petrus were forever grumbling about the slipping morality of the younger generation, Brock was glad to see it.

What better defiance was there to the annihilation they had faced than this evidence of new life? And what better antidote to the hatred that had driven that attempt than this evidence of love?

Or if not love, he thought wryly, at least something approximating it.

As the brides and grooms filed into the amphitheatre, and lined up next to each other, Brock smiled, thinking back to the pursuits of his younger days. There had been many an adventure before he had found Isolde, his one and only wife. What a woman she had been, and what a tragedy it was that Mihai had never met her.

The Kazarkhan shook off these morbid thoughts as the musicians struck up, and the couples started the slow, complex dance that marked the beginning of the ceremony. Their feet moved in carefully rehearsed rhythms, and the beat of the tune was first matched, and then drowned out, by the thunderous claps of the audience.

The Kazarkhan joined in, smacking his palms together with the perfect rhythm. If ever proof was needed that his people were one, it came in festivals like this, where old and young, male and female, and saint and sinner joined together in one, eternal whole.

Eventually, as the dance slowly came to its conclusion, winding down like the workings of some mechanical timepiece, the elder raised one bony claw. The music stopped and the men and women fell back into line. The elder beckoned the first of them, and Brock saw with the joy of a man who thinks he has spotted a good omen that the first to be married were Dannie and Chera.

Then, as they stepped forward, Brock caught sight of the ravaged skin of Chera's face, and he frowned. Realising that others could see him, he smiled instead, and hoped that the surprise at the condition of

her skin didn't show in his eyes as the elder stepped forward to bless them.

"What are your names?" the old man asked them, looming down from the platform with all the angular severity of a hanging judge.

"Dannie Hortenza," Dannie said, goggling up at the elder, and swallowing a lump in his throat that felt as big as a fist.

"Chera Malfi," the girl said, clutching at her groom's hand as if afraid that the ground was about to open beneath her feet.

"Dannie Hortenza and Chera Malfi are about to be wed," the elder boomed, to nobody in particular. "Does anybody object?"

The amphitheatre fell as silent as an auction house when the bidding gets too high. Dannie and Chera turned to smile reassuringly at each other as the elder took the ceremonial knife and chalice that were handed to him.

Before he could continue, however, a single, shrill voice cut through the silence of the amphitheatre.

Everybody froze, including the elder. Then the voice came again, and all heads turned to see who had spoken. When they saw, nervous laughter rippled around the amphitheatre.

The raven whose voice they had heard sat perched on one of the railings, looking curiously around at the gathering. It opened its mouth to crawl again, but, before it could, somebody threw a boot at it and, with an angry squawk, it fluttered away.

The elder pursed his lips, shrugged, and then turned back to Dannie and Chera. "For Ushoran's blessing," he intoned, and, as the two offered their hands, he expertly whipped the tip of the blade across the pads of their thumbs. It was neatly done, deep enough to draw a few drops of blood, but no deeper, and he held out the chalice to receive their offering.

"In Ushoran's name, I pronounce thee man and wife," he cried, and the deathly silence was replaced by a howl of approval from the assembled Strigany. Brock grinned, as widely as the groom, and, the ceremony complete, stepped forward to slap Dannie on the back, and shake Chera's hand.

"My blessing too," he said.

As the next couple stepped up to be wed, he was happy to see that, raven or no, Dannie and his bride only had eyes for each other.

Quite right too, Brock told himself. After all, this superstitious nonsense was nothing but silliness for bored old women.

Even so, as more ravens gathered to perch on the top of the walls that contained the amphitheatre, he couldn't help looking nervously up at them from time to time. At first, there were a dozen, and then a score. As proceedings dragged on, the black-clad visitors assembled in their hundreds. They sat around the back wall of the amphitheatre,

unseen by most of the people, who were squashed into the seats below.

Only the petrus seemed to notice them, occasionally flashing furtive glances up towards the birds, as cautiously as debtors who have spotted a bailiff.

As Brock shook hands with the next couple, he had a sudden feeling of absolute relief that they were leaving this terrible place.

Whatever awaited them on the road, it couldn't be worse than what had happened to them in Flintmar.

EPILOGUE

“The joy of a market place is that you pay for what you get. The curse of life is that you get what you pay for.”

– Strigany saying In the past days, autumn had suddenly withered beneath the relentless advance of winter. Last week, the wind that had howled over the battlements had carried with it the brown leaves of the dying summer, and the last migrating birds. Now, it blasted the battlements with ice and sleet, which meant that the battlements were no place to be, even if you were huddled in a cloak with plenty of gin inside of you.

That's what Halberdier Jensen thought, anyway, which was why, tonight, he was sitting inside one of the towers that led onto the section of battlements he was supposed to be patrolling. He had relieved the last sentry at dusk, and, ever since then, he had sat poking at the brazier and puffing at his pipe. The tobacco smoke danced merrily around the shadows of the little room, before being shredded and whipped out of the doors onto the battlements, or down the spiralling staircase that led up to them.

Jensen watched the smoke and huddled deeper into his cloak. It was cold up here, and lonely, but, by Sigmar's left ball, it was better than being in the hall.

His lord, the Elector Count of Averland, had never been much of a one for bonhomie, Jensen reflected sourly. He didn't drink or whore, and, not only did he not do it, but he didn't seem to want anybody else to do it either. Then there was the penny pinching: the fines for worn-out equipment, and the rationing of everything from straw to lamp oil. Even Jensen and his comrades were given no more than one ration of beef a week, and where would their lord's pallid carcass be without them to guard him?

Jensen spat into the brazier as he contemplated these injustices, and snuggled even deeper down into his cloak. He knew that things weren't like this in the courts of other elector counts. Some of the lads who had been to Stirland said that the men who served that elector count ate beef every night, and had ale with every meal.

Even though Averland had always been a swine to work for, the past few months had made his castle the most miserable place that Jensen had ever lived in, and, Sigmar knew, he'd lived in a some awful places.

It had all begun with Averland's crusade against the Strigany. At first, Jensen, as well as the rest of the men, had welcomed the opportunities that the licensed persecution had seemed to offer. The Strigany were renowned for the extent of their stolen wealth, and

turning them over promised to be a healthy way of supplementing a halberdier's meagre income.

Unfortunately, the Strigany hadn't been so easily turned over. They had been quick, and, even when they hadn't been quick enough, they had been ferocious.

However, their ferocity had been nothing compared to the elector count's. He had taken to flogging every man whose patrol failed to kill enough Strigany, and, as the amount of Strigany they killed was never enough, almost all of them had been flogged.

It was only when the captains had started inventing fictional caravans and notional battles against them that Averland, Sigmar cripple him, had relented. Not that this hadn't cost the captains and their men; even though the caravans had been imaginary the loot that they were supposed to share with their lord had still had to be found. More than one merchant's caravan had been "mistaken" for a Strigany one, and that had started to cause its own problems.

Jensen wondered, for the thousandth time, if it might be a good idea to leave Averland's guard. He had joined up because he had thought that it would be easier than life in a free company or a state regiment. Now, he wasn't so sure. He especially wasn't sure after the news that had arrived three days ago.

It had been borne by a ragged rider on the back of a winded horse, and the man had been half dead with fatigue, as he had stumbled into the elector count's audience chamber.

He hadn't stumbled back out again. He had been carried, as dead as a coffin nail, his body covered in a sheet. According to Averland's personal bodyguard, the messenger had died of a heart attack, although, according to one of Jensen's cronies if it had been a heart attack it had been one brought on by being beaten to death.

The Strigany, it seemed, hadn't just survived the cull that Averland had planned for them, but had turned from hunted to hunters, and had annihilated the army that Averland had sent to slaughter them. There had been all sorts of wild rumours about how they had done it, from summoning daemons to buying off the mercenaries, to using magic to turn the attacking soldiers into crows.

Jensen didn't believe any of the stories. He didn't really care about them, either. All that he cared about was the mood that had pervaded the castle since the news had arrived. It made the ice-laden winds that howled outside seem positively toasty, and everybody was silent and snappy, and on edge. They all knew that it was only a matter of time before the lit fuse of Averland's personality resulted in... well, who knew what the carpet-chewing maniac would do next?

"Jensen! What are you doing skulking in here, you rascal?"

Jensen, who had been wrapped too deeply in the warmth of his

cloak and the comfort of his mutinous thoughts to hear his captain's approach, sprang to his feet and clipped off a salute. The effect was rather spoiled by the pipe that remained clenched in his teeth, and the stained blanket he was wearing over his shoulders.

"Evening, sir," he said, removing the pipe from his mouth. "I'm assigned guard duty tonight. Got the skeleton shift."

The captain strolled over to the brazier and opened his hands over it.

"Don't try it on with me, Jensen," he growled, his face a brutal mask of reflected fire and black shadows, "I wrote the rota."

"I'm not trying it on, captain," Jensen told him, wondering how much hatred he dared put into his voice. All officers were turds, but this one really took the biscuit.

"Get out onto the battlements where you're supposed to be," the captain told him, before sitting down on Jensen's chair and fishing out his pipe. "Well, get on with it, man!"

Jensen didn't quite dare not to salute as he shrugged his cloak up around his shoulders, picked up his halberd, and trudged out into the night.

In the blast of frozen night air, he almost lost his footing on the ice that covered the parapet, and he cursed loudly and long. The hail that had been falling earlier had turned to sleet, and he hadn't walked a dozen paces before water started to trickle down into his boots.

What a complete waste of time this was. The city that lay beyond the castle was as dark as a forest. Nobody was mad enough to be out on a night like this, especially nobody whose business required a torch. The courtyard on the other side of the wall was hardly any more lively. A single torch burned in a glass case by the stables, the light barely enough to illuminate the cobbles beneath it, let alone the rest of the yard.

"Sigmar curse them all," Jensen muttered democratically, and sidled into an abutment that arced out over the wall. The extra height of the battlements here meant that it was slightly less exposed than the rest of the wall. As long as he kept his eye on the door that led back into the tower, he wouldn't be caught unawares by the stinking duty officer either.

If only it wasn't winter, he'd desert like a shot.

He was deep into a plan of shipping out to Lustria, supposedly a land of gold and constant sunshine, when the sleet petered out and the wind softened. Stamping his feet against the cold, Jensen sidled back out onto the battlements proper, and, using his halberd as a walking stick, he walked the length between the two towers. When he reached the second, he turned back, and had taken a dozen steps when he saw that he was no longer alone.

At first, he mistook the apparition that had appeared on the parapet for a shadow, except, of course, that shadows didn't tower up into the night from cold stone. Nor did they blot out the light that glowed through the cracks in the tower's door.

"Hello?" Jensen asked warily, and the thing turned to face him. It was a dark, misshapen mass, the silhouette more gargoyle than human, although, that it was real, Jensen no longer had any doubt. Its eyes, slits in the darkness of the night, shone as silver as dead moons, and, even through the damp blanket that he had wrapped around his face, Jensen could smell it. It stank even worse than it looked.

Despite the cold, Jensen began to sweat. He suddenly remembered the stories about the daemons that the Strigany, Sigmar rot them, had used against Blysedén's army. It seemed that those stories hadn't been so exaggerated after all.

Another man might have fought or run from the abomination that appeared before them, but Jensen was too old a lag to make either mistake. Instead of panicking, he saluted.

"Pass, my lord," he said, and bowed.

The twinkle of the thing's eyes disappeared as it turned away, and loped down the battlements towards the tower. Jensen watched with something approaching pleasure as it tore open the door and lurched inside. He saw a brief image of the thing's outline, huge and malformed, and, beyond it, the terrified face of the duty officer as he leapt to his feet. Then the brazier was kicked over, and, after a short, piercing shriek, the battlements were as dark and as silent as they had been before.

Jensen fished his pipe out of his pocket, and bent over so that he could light it in the lee of the wall. When it was burning merrily away, he resumed his pacing, a slight smile on his face.

He had a feeling that, what with one thing and another, life in the late elector count's castle might be about to improve. Ushoran moved though his quarry's fortress with lethal assurance. Even though he was beginning to recover from the worst ravages of his exile, he still wore his stealth as effortlessly as a cloak, and it was only when he chose to let them that the unfortunate inhabitants of Averland's domain saw him.

At first, his haste made him merciful, and he killed only when it was necessary or convenient. Occasionally, he would pause to tear open one of his victim's minds before dispatching them, and, soon, he was navigating through the elector count's castle as effortlessly as his oldest servants.

After the first few rooms, though, as the murderous rush of his attack began to slow, Ushoran found his attention being caught by the tapestries and the sculptures with which the elector count had

decorated his lair. It was crude, barbaric stuff, primitive beyond belief compared to the treasures that had once adorned his own palaces.

Still, after so many years, he gloried in his capacity to savour more than blood and terror, not that blood and terror didn't remain as savoury as ever, of course.

There was the room full of serving maids, for instance, bent over their sewing, as docile as a flock of lambs ready for the slaughter. He hadn't been able to resist. Then, there were the guards who had been half asleep in their beds. He had painted the room with their blood, great sprays of velvety redness that he had splattered across the stonework with the inspired frenzy of the true artist.

For a while, he had been in danger of losing his head, not so much a stoat in a warren as a fox in a chicken coop, unable to stop killing until the farmer came for him. With the rebirth of his pride had come a modicum of self-discipline, however, and so, with barely a quarter of the castle's inhabitants slaughtered, he had made his way to the Averland's inner sanctum.

There were a dozen guards in the antechamber. They wore full armour, and, when he fell upon them, they reacted with disciplined rage, instead of the panic that Ushoran had encountered so far. It was all the same to him. They died just as pathetically easily as any mortals.

When he had finished with the last of them, a six foot-tall Reiklander whose neck he had snapped as easily as a chicken's, Ushoran lifted the door from its hinges and prowled into Averland's audience chamber.

It was a cold place, the fire unlit, and only a single lantern burning to illuminate the faded tapestries and worm-eaten furniture. Yet Averland, who sat slumped in the throne of his ancestors, looked no more cold than he looked afraid.

"It's you," he said, as Ushoran approached him, as silently as spilled oil. "I wondered how long it would be before you arrived."

Ushoran paused in front of the man and regarded him with pink-eyed curiosity.

Averland looked away.

"I don't like your eyes," he whispered. "They look like eyes that see things."

"Look at me anyway," Ushoran told him, and, to his surprise, he found that his lips formed the words as well as his mind. His voice was nothing like he remembered it; it lacked the razor smoothness or the commanding boom, sounding reedy, as dry as dust, and as passionless as the wind that whined through the cold depths of Averland's castle.

Somehow, Averland managed to disobey the command. Instead of

looking, he started to sob, drawing his knees to his chest, and rocking back and forth in his throne. Ushoran watched him curiously then reached out, extending a single talon to slice a tear drop from Averland's face. Tears. He remembered them from the old days.

"Why did you hurt my people?" he asked, his voice wheezing through spitless vocal chords.

"Because," Averland answered, and now he did look up, into the glittering deadness of his persecutor's eyes. "Because I had to. Don't you understand? I had to."

Ushoran understood, and with that understanding came the decision that death was too good for this upstart mortal.

He had failed with the girl. He had meant to stop her heart and bind her half life to his, but his appetite had overwhelmed him at the crucial juncture. With this one, though, he would not fail.

He extended his talons and went to work.

For the first time in millennia, he threw back his head and laughed. The sound echoed through the cold stone passageways of Averland's keep, freezing the inhabitants with the desperate, mindless terror of cornered animals. They remained crouched and paralysed with terror, as Ushoran stalked out of their fallen fortress and hurried away to the south.

The leisurely progress of the previous weeks was gone. Instead, he twisted and turned, struggling within his skin, as his bones grew and tapered into wings, vast enough to lift him into the sleet-ridden sky. Now that his duty of vengeance was discharged there could be no more delays.

His people were awaiting him.